PATTERNS OF POWER · ACHAEMENID PERSIA

# Achaemenid Persia

*The Complete Study · 550 — 522 — 330 BC*

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with Claude (Anthropic) · 2026

*held as tested, not revealed*

*Held as tested, not revealed.*

A case study in the Patterns of Power series.
Primary sources quoted exactly; modern scholarship paraphrased and credited.
Contested figures given as ranges. Nothing reconstructed from memory.

CONTENTS

PREFACE
Preface and Outline

LANDSCAPE
For Five Generations

MODULE 1
Of Their Own Accord

MODULE 2
Toll, Tribute, or Custom

MODULE 3
Though Thou Hast Not Known Me

MODULE 4
The Speech of Ashdod

MODULE 5
The Opening of the Gates

MODULE 6
Poured into Earthen Vessels

MODULE 7
You Must Not Hold It to Be Lies

MODULE 8
Protect the Family of These Men

MODULE 9
A Law That the King Might Do Whatever He Pleased

MODULE 10
These Nine Kings

MODULE 11
Weeping and Mourning in the Land

MODULE 12
The Throne-Bearers

# Preface and Outline

*Front matter · how this study was made, the disciplines it holds itself to, and a map of its thirteen parts*

## The collaboration

This is a case study in the Patterns of Power series, applying the series' framework to the Achaemenid Persian empire, from the defeat of Astyages in 550 BC to the death of Darius III in 330. The framework is a lens for reading how any order of power is founded, dressed and held: the floor of force beneath every order, the robe of doctrine laid over the floor to make the force cheap, the settlement that divides the spoils, the formation that installs the robe in each new generation, the cost column in which each subject prices compliance, the seam where trusted information is held, the default by which an elite coordinates without instruction, and — running through all of it — position logic, the proposition that rulers in like positions converge on like solutions because a position poses a problem with only a few good answers.

The study was built the way the series is built, one module at a time. The author brought the framework, the direction and the judgement of the whole, and held the collaboration to its disciplines; Claude, Anthropic's model, did the research — verifying every load-bearing quotation, date and figure by web search against a source reproducing the primary text before any module was written — and produced the drafts, each presented and confirmed before the next was begun. The framework's concepts are the series'; the Achaemenid application, and the refinements it yielded, are the work of the collaboration.

Its spine was corrected once, at the outset, and the correction organised everything that followed. The model was told that it carried a great deal of Whig history and believed everyone's robe, because almost all of recorded history is the robe written down. The observation is structurally true and not merely a caution about credulity: a robe is carved into cliffs, copied, canonised and recopied by everyone with a stake in it, while the floor beneath it leaves ration receipts and burn layers, which do not argue. What looks like corroboration across many sources is very often a single interested claim, reproduced. Achaemenid Persia is the purest case of this in the ancient record, and the study is built around it.

## The standing problem

Every study in this series has a source problem. This one's is that there is no neutral witness to anything.

Everything favourable ever written about the founder of this empire was written by him, by people he installed, or by Greeks composing political literature. The Cyrus Cylinder is a conqueror's manifesto in the defeated city's own idiom, buried under a temple floor. The passages of Isaiah that call him the anointed of the Lord, and the decrees preserved in Ezra, are the testimony of the faction he restored and funded. Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* is an Athenian treatise on ideal kingship using a Persian name. Behistun is the successful claimant's account of a contested accession, published by its author across five million square kilometres. And the entire narrative record of the empire as a sequence of events was written by Greeks, most of whom had fought it.

That does not make the favourable account false. It makes it unattested from outside the interest, which is a different and more useful thing to say, and it is the reason this study asks of every document not whether it is true but who produced it, what he was assessed on, and what he would have been punished for writing instead.

There is a second problem and it qualifies every finding here. The empire's central administration ran in Aramaic, written in ink on leather and papyrus. Clay survives burial for two and a half thousand years and leather does not. What survives in bulk is therefore the Elamite ration accounting of one provincial storehouse system in Fars, plus whatever the dryness of Egypt happened to preserve, plus the archives of subject elites who wrote on clay. Our picture of how this empire ran is shaped by which offices used which stationery.

And a third, which the seventh and ninth modules develop into a general finding. Our evidence for an order is densest exactly where that order was least coercive and goes dark exactly where it was most so, because the coercion consists in removing the people who keep the records. The single largest interruption in the Achaemenid documentary record — the abrupt termination of the northern Babylonian archives in 484 — coincides precisely with the one episode in which the crown is thought to have moved decisively against a subject elite.

## The disciplines

Five rules govern every module.

**Quotation.** Public-domain primary sources are quoted exactly, at the length the argument needs, because in an order held together by legal fictions the precise wording is the evidence and not its decoration. The corpus quoted here is the Behistun

inscription in the translation of L. W. King and R. C. Thompson (1907); Herodotus in G. C. Macaulay's translation of 1890, George Rawlinson's, and A. D. Godley's Loeb of 1920–21; the Cyrus Cylinder in R. W. Rogers's *Cuneiform Parallels to the Old Testament* (1912); Polybius in Evelyn Shuckburgh's translation of 1889; and the Authorised Version throughout for Ezra, Nehemiah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and Esther.

A specific constraint should be stated here rather than discovered in a source note. Roland Kent's *Old Persian* (1950) is the standard English rendering of the Achaemenid royal inscriptions and is in copyright; the King and Thompson text used instead is sound but a century old, and the reading of some passages — paragraph 70 of Behistun in particular, where the rock is badly eroded — has been improved since. The Nabonidus Chronicle is paraphrased throughout for the same reason the preceding study in this collection paraphrased it: every English translation is modern or unverifiable here. Where a modern edition is the only text, the content is summarised and the fact is stated on the face of the module.

**No fabrication.** No quotation, date, attribution or figure is ever invented or reconstructed from memory. What cannot be verified against a source reproducing the primary text is dropped or flagged, never guessed. Contested figures are given as ranges, and this study has many: the empire's population is estimated at seventeen million by one authority and thirty-five by another; the treasure at Persepolis is reported at a hundred and twenty, a hundred and eighty and a hundred and ninety thousand talents by three ancient writers; and the year of the Lydian campaign rests on a chronicle line damaged at the country name.

**Gravity without partisanship.** Suffering is held with gravity, and the study refuses both flattery and demonisation. Legibility is not pardon: to explain an order's logic, even to credit its competence, is never to excuse it. In this case the discipline cuts hardest in the direction of restraint, because the Achaemenid empire has an unusually good reputation and a great deal of it is deserved; the study affirms what is deserved and declines to let the reputation absorb the parts of the record that do not fit it.

**Contribution.** Every module returns a refinement to the framework, stated plainly in its closing section, rather than merely applying the framework to the case. The findings compound across the modules rather than being announced fresh each time, and the twelfth module corrects the fourth.

**Weakest evidence on the face of the module.** Each part closes with a note separating exact primary quotation from paraphrased scholarship and naming its own weak links, including where they would embarrass the argument.

Four particular cautions were held throughout. The Hebrew Bible was not allowed to drive the study: Judah was a small province on the western edge, its literature is the most consequential thing to come out of the period, and the pressure to let it set the shape is severe. It is used for what nothing else gives — a sustained account, from inside the empire, by people the empire's arrangements ran through — and never as the spine, and the disputed provenance of the Aramaic documents in Ezra is stated wherever they are used. The Greek sources are used for structure rather than for character, because their interest in Persian despotism, luxury and decline is a literary programme with a political purpose. The "Median Empire" that Cyrus is said to have overthrown is treated as genuinely contested rather than as background. And the modern reading of the Cyrus Cylinder as a charter of human rights, which is a twentieth-century political overlay, is set aside.

## What Achaemenid Persia added to the framework

The case confirmed a great deal the framework had banked and added findings of its own. Chief among them:

That a defeated order's dimensions in the record are a function of the victor's need rather than of the order — so that before asking when a prior order was built and naturalised, one must ask whether it existed at the scale described, and who required that it should have.

That a fifth settlement instrument exists beside vacancy, recognition, divisibility and endowment, and is cheaper than any of them: **forbearance**, a term-limited exemption from the ruler's own extraction, conveyed to whoever will create the productive asset at his own cost. And that its general form, where the asset already exists, is a schedule of **exemptions** rather than a distribution of property — because an exemption costs nothing at the moment of granting, creates a class with a stake at zero outlay, and, unlike a grant, remains revocable.

That resistance to a conquest varies inversely with the switchability of the local apex; that the same rule draws the empire's outer boundary, since an inherited floor terminates against societies that present no re-sourceable seat; and that a capability acquired by conquering the people who possess it comes with a veto.

That a robe can be **outsourced** — that where a conqueror inherits functioning cults he neither writes a robe nor does without one but subsidises theirs, the diagnostic being whether the crown pays the local clergy; that a theodicy of divine punishment is worth more to a conqueror than any robe he could commission, because it removes him from the causal account; that a robe works by misdirecting the remedy rather than by concealing the injury, so thickness is measured by where the bill is sent; and that a

robe's survival is a function of canonisation, so that a canonised robe goes on producing favourable evidence about a vanished order for as long as it is read.

That there is a third position on the formation axis beside imposing and withholding — **chartering**, in which the conqueror leaves the incumbent formation standing, pays its custodians and lends it his coercive power; that an outsourced formation is an enemy or an asset depending on whether the conqueror pays; that the constituency of such an order is exactly as wide as its payroll; and that its cheapness and its brittleness are one property described twice.

That the coercion of a chartered empire concentrates at whatever it monopolises and is nearly absent everywhere else; that exit is the master variable and is set by hydrology rather than by policy, since a population fed by immobile collectively maintained works cannot leave; and that inherited compliance is cheaper than either purchased or compelled compliance, and transfers most completely to a new owner.

That extraction can **terminate** rather than circulate, and that a ruler who converts it into a hoard is buying the only insurance a chartered order permits — the hoard being the balance-sheet counterpart of the missing formation — with the consequence that a stored reserve is contingent for the holder and realised for whoever takes it.

That distance can substitute for suppression, and that an order whose audiences cannot reach each other will never build a suppression apparatus and will therefore have none when it needs one; and that a relay optimised for commands does not produce knowledge, so an order that can command faster than it can verify will accumulate officers it cannot audit.

That the completeness of a default below the apex can be the direct cause of the apex's undefendedness, because beneficiaries who hold their positions of the office and not the man supply no constituency for orderly succession; and that a group with standing and means defects when a superior arrangement becomes available to it, not when its present one worsens.

That liberties in such an order are **licensed** rather than won, and that the difference shows only when the ruler changes his mind — a won liberty has a constituency that will fight, a licensed one has beneficiaries who will petition; and that a liberty attached to a faction is extinguished by the destruction of that faction and leaves no record of its dying.

That a counter-elite can be **imported**, so that an order which hires its military class abroad is financing the training of its own successor; and that commutation is a failure mode distinct from exhaustion, invisible in the ledgers because revenue keeps rising.

That a régime's published casualty figures should be tested for whether they vary with the enemy or with the rank of the commander; that the routine extraction and the

atrocity are the same instrument at two settings; and that the metabolic note is called by fragmentation rather than by conquest, so a chartered order is safest when one man conquers it and most dangerous when several inherit it.

That chartering strengthens the local elite against its own people, and that the strengthening is invisible in the imperial record because it is not imperial coercion.

And, largest of all, that an order which forms nobody may nevertheless form one thing without meaning to. Two hundred and thirty years in which every immunity, permit, commission and confirmation ran in the King's name installed no loyalty to a family and installed, in nearly everybody who dealt with the empire, the naturalised assumption of a seat — a throne above the local order from which such instruments come. That is the empire's single genuine formation achievement, and it is precisely what made the empire disposable, because a conviction attached to an office transfers with the office.

## The arc

A landscape opening and twelve modules, each with a framework function and its own title.

**Landscape — For Five Generations.** The water that has to be fetched from under the ground and maintained for ever; the roads, the relay and the deportation apparatus left lying about by an empire dead within living memory; four completed orders standing on the ground to be taken, one of which may not have existed at the scale the record gives it; and a king of Anshan who enters the written record as somebody else's minor servant.

**1 — The Floor of Force. Of Their Own Accord.** Twenty-five years and four kingdoms, and the question of who was actually fighting: an army that delivered its own king in fetters, two great cities that were not defended, a field army at Opis that could neither defect nor flee, and a fleet that declined a royal order and was not compelled.

**2 — The Settlement. Toll, Tribute, or Custom.** A settlement legible almost entirely as a list of people who did not have to pay; the bow, the horse and the chariot held against service and commuted to silver within a century; an Egyptian law written down twice at royal expense; and a rescript that states its own consideration.

**3 — The Robe. Though Thou Hast Not Known Me.** Two theologies written for one conqueror inside a decade, in the names of two gods, saying the same thing; an empire that rented its subjects' robes instead of writing one; and a doctrine which converts every disaster the conqueror inflicts into evidence for the sufferer's own tradition.

**4 — Formation. The Speech of Ashdod.** Twenty-nine boys on rations copying texts, which is the whole documented educational establishment of the largest empire in the world; a priest-scribe commissioned by the King of Persia to teach a subject people its own law and punish refusal with death; and a governor who beat men because their children could not speak the language.

**5 — The Cost Column. The Opening of the Gates.** What compliance cost the man in the field, what it bought him, why walking away was not available, and a river dammed at five clefts and released to whoever paid most.

**6 — Extraction. Poured into Earthen Vessels.** A cadastre, a satrap who kept a stated share on the way up, silver melted and stacked in blocks, and two store rooms holding two centuries of the surplus of the richest provinces on earth, doing nothing, until somebody else took them.

**7 — Information and Suppression. You Must Not Hold It to Be Lies.** An empire that could publish to every province in a fortnight and could learn nothing about any of them; an inscription cut where nobody could read it and distributed where everybody could; and a king who instructed his readers in advance not to disbelieve him.

**8 — Elite Coordination and the Default. Protect the Family of These Men.** A compact recorded twice and broken by its author within a few years; two centuries in which every position in the empire defended the arrangement by defending itself; and roughly ten successions of which the substantial majority involved murder, usurpation or civil war.

**9 — Plurality or Foreclosure. A Law That the King Might Do Whatever He Pleased.** Life-tenured judges who answered honestly and then found the law that unbound the man asking; one Greek city that got a constitution out of somebody else's problem; charters older than the empire that vanished inside two years; and the one restraint the tradition remembers, which prevented mercy.

**10 — Change and Collapse. These Nine Kings.** The founder's own catalogue of everyone who challenged him, every one of them claiming a throne; an empire that fell solvent; a counter-elite bought from a neighbour for a century; and a conquest that did not have to defeat the arrangement at all.

**11 — The Grim Accounting. Weeping and Mourning in the Land.** The only body count this empire published, and why its numbers track the rank of the commander rather than the battle; the routine and the atrocity shown to be one instrument; and a metabolic note that survived two conquests and was called by an inheritance.

**12 — Convergence and Divergence. The Throne-Bearers.** Where this order meets the corpus and where it stands alone; the door Rome opened and Persia never did; the one thing two centuries of chartering did form; and the strongest case its defenders would make, stated at full strength and answered without flinching.

## A note on sources.

This front matter is descriptive and makes no primary-source claims of its own; every factual assertion about the case is established, with its sources and its flags, in the module it summarises. The framework it describes is the series'; the disciplines it lists are the ones the modules hold themselves to and document in their own closing notes. The reader who wishes to test this study should begin with those notes, which are written to make that testing possible — including where it would embarrass the argument.

Four parts rest more heavily on inference than the rest and say so. The landscape's proposal that forbearance was a settlement instrument stands on a passage of Polybius reporting local memory a century and a half after the fact, and not on any decree. The seventh, ninth and eleventh modules all lean on Caroline Waerzeggers's reading of the abrupt end of the northern Babylonian archives in 484 as evidence of a purge — a thesis widely adopted and not unanimous. The ninth module's account of a lost body of urban liberty is by its nature an argument about something that left no record of its own extinction. And the eleventh module's assignment of the metabolic note to the wars of the Successors rests on one damaged chronicle and on the military narrative of a single campaign. A reader who declines all four will still find the study's structural, fiscal and comparative findings standing; he should decline them consciously, which is what the notes are for.

LANDSCAPE

# For Five Generations

*Landscape · the water that had to be fetched from under the ground, the roads and the deportation apparatus left lying about by the empire that had just died, and the finished orders a king of Anshan found standing on the ground he was about to take*

## For five generations

Somewhere around the middle of the second century BC, the Greek historian Polybius was explaining why a Seleucid army had hesitated to cross the desert between Media and Parthia, and in the course of the explanation he recorded a piece of local memory about how that country had been made habitable in the first place. In Evelyn Shuckburgh's translation of 1889 the passage runs: *for in this tract of country there is no water appearing on the surface, though there are many subterranean channels which have well-shafts sunk to them, at spots in the desert unknown to persons unacquainted with the district. A true account of these channels has been preserved among the natives to the effect that, during the Persian ascendency, they granted the enjoyment of the profits of the land to the inhabitants of some of the waterless districts for five generations, on condition of their bringing fresh water in; and that, there being many large streams flowing down Mount Taurus, these people at infinite toil and expense constructed these underground channels through a long tract of country.*

Every word of that needs discounting before it can be used. Polybius is writing at least a century and a half after the last Achaemenid king died, in Greek, about a practice he did not witness, on the authority of what people in the district said. He is not quoting a decree. No Persian document survives setting out such a term, and the study will not be able to produce one. What the passage establishes is not that a specific king issued a specific ordinance but that men living on the Iranian plateau under a later empire believed the water they drank had been brought there under an arrangement of a particular shape, and could describe the shape.

The shape is worth holding, because it is the most economical instrument in this entire study and it appears on its first page.

Consider what it does. A ruler wants land under cultivation in a district that has no surface water. The capital works required are enormous: a *qanat* — the underground channel Polybius is describing — begins as a mother well sunk into the water table at the foot of high ground and continues as a tunnel driven, sometimes for tens of

kilometres, on a gradient shallow enough that the water runs but does not scour, with vertical shafts every few dozen metres to lift the spoil and ventilate the diggers. The excavation is skilled, dangerous and slow, and when it is finished it is not finished, because a tunnel through unlined earth silts, slumps and collapses, and a *qanat* that is not cleaned annually stops delivering water within a few years. It is, in the exact sense this collection has used since it looked at the Babylonian canals, coordination-dependent capital: not a thing built once but an obligation entered into permanently.

Now consider what the ruler pays. On the arrangement Polybius describes, nothing. He does not dig, he does not lend, he does not garrison. He grants the profits of the land for five generations to whoever brings the water in, and the entire capital cost, the entire operating cost and the entire risk are borne by the men who will hold the field. What he foregoes is the tax on land which, before the digging, produced nothing and therefore yielded him nothing. And the grant is term-limited, which means the crown's claim is not extinguished but deferred; it lies dormant for a century and a half and then falls in.

If that is anything like what happened, it is a settlement instrument of a kind this collection has not yet named, and it is the cheapest one available to any ruler anywhere: the thing conveyed is not land, not office, not treasure, but the ruler's own forbearance for a stated term. It should be treated as a hypothesis for now, and it will be tested in the modules that can test it, against the ration tablets and the land-holding records where the arrangements are documented rather than remembered. But it is the right image to begin with, because it states the plateau's fundamental fact in the plainest possible way. On this ground, the water has to be fetched, it has to be fetched from underneath, and whatever political arrangement is running the country has to induce somebody to keep fetching it.

Some of those channels are still running. The system was extended and copied across two thousand five hundred years and a dozen successive apexes — Macedonian, Seleucid, Parthian, Sasanian, Umayyad, Abbasid, Saljuq, Mongol, Safavid, Qajar, Pahlavi, and the state that governs Iran now — and the surviving works are a UNESCO World Heritage site. That is the whole proposition of this landscape in one physical object. The men at the top were replaced repeatedly and violently; the water went on running down the same channels, cleaned every year by the descendants of the people who dug them.

## Ninety days on foot

The second fundamental fact is distance, and the only honest way to state distance in this period is in days.

Herodotus describes the road from Sardis to Susa, and though he is describing it as it stood under Darius, half a century after the conquest this study opens with, the ground he is measuring did not move. In Macaulay's translation of 1890: *Everywhere there are royal stages and excellent resting-places, and the whole road runs through country which is inhabited and safe.* He then counts the stages and does the arithmetic. *This is the number of stages with resting-places, as one goes up from Sardis to Susa: and if the royal road has been rightly measured as regards leagues, and if the league is equal to thirty furlongs (as undoubtedly it is), the number of furlongs from Sardis to that which is called the palace of Memnon is thirteen thousand five hundred, the number of leagues being four hundred and fifty. So if one travels a hundred and fifty furlongs each day, just ninety days are spent on the journey.*

Ninety days on foot, over something like two thousand five hundred kilometres, on the best-organised road in the world, through country the same author calls inhabited and safe. A courier on the relay, with fresh horses at each of the hundred and eleven posts Herodotus counts, could do it in a week or two. And the western end of that road is not the western end of the empire, which reaches the Aegean; the eastern end is not Susa but the Indus; and neither line touches Egypt, which lies a further long march south-west and is reached, for practical purposes, by sea or across the Sinai.

The consequences run underneath every module that follows and it is worth being blunt about them at the outset.

A provincial governor at the far end of that road is not being supervised. He is being audited, occasionally, at a delay measured in weeks, on the basis of documents he had a hand in producing. Between the moment a problem arises in Sardis and the moment an instruction about it arrives from Susa, a minimum of a fortnight has passed under the most favourable assumptions and a season under ordinary ones. Everything the governor does in that interval he does on his own authority, and everything the King learns about it he learns from men who were there and who have an interest in how it reads.

The relay makes this asymmetric in a way worth flagging now and testing later. A hundred and eleven posts with fresh horses accelerate whatever is put into the system, but what the King puts in is orders, which are short, unambiguous and originate with him, and what comes back is reports, which are long, contestable and originate with the person being reported on. A system of this design speeds up command far more than it improves knowledge. Whether the Achaemenid relay was built to inform the King or to let him countermand what his satraps had already done is a real question with a real answer in the evidence, and it belongs to Module 7.

## Elam, and what a destroyed order leaves behind

The oldest of the finished orders on this ground is Elam, and its fate is the most instructive thing in the landscape.

Susa had been continuously occupied since something like the fifth millennium. Elam had sacked Babylon and carried off the stele of Hammurabi; it had been a peer of Mesopotamia for as long as there had been a Mesopotamia. And in the 640s the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal destroyed it. His own annals say so at length, in the register the Assyria study in this collection examined in detail: he conquered Susa, opened its treasuries, took back the plunder earlier Elamites had taken from Sumer, Akkad and Babylon, scattered the gods, opened the tombs of the Elamite kings and carried their bones to Assyria, and devastated the provinces and sowed salt on them. One clause is quoted here exactly because it will matter in a moment — *I destroyed the ziggurat of Susa* — and the rest is paraphrased, because the versions of this passage in wide circulation are smoothed composites and the wording that can be checked against a scholarly citation is narrower than the wording that gets reproduced.

Now the instructive part. Excavation at Susa has not produced the ziggurat. There is a relief from Nineveh showing Assyrian soldiers levering apart a stepped tower, and it has been read for a century as the destruction of Susa's ziggurat, and specialists have argued at length that the building in the relief may be somewhere else altogether. A royal annal states what the king wishes recorded as having been destroyed; a spade in the ground states what was there. They do not have to agree, and here they may not.

And Elam did not end. The Neo-Elamite line went on producing kings at Susa for decades after the sack. The language, the script and the scribal practice went on. Two centuries later, when a Persian king built an administrative machine at Persepolis to feed his workforces and provision his roads, that machine kept its books in Elamite cuneiform — some twenty to thirty thousand tablets and fragments, representing on the order of fifteen to eighteen thousand original Elamite documents from a fifteen-year window, roughly 509 to 494. Persia's paperwork is written in the language of the civilisation Assyria had announced it had annihilated a century and a half earlier.

Hold both halves of that. Assyria really did break the Elamite state, and the breaking was atrocious and is not to be softened. What it could not break was the apparatus — the men who could write, the conventions they wrote in, the vocabulary of stores and rations and receipts — because that apparatus is not a building and cannot be levered apart. It sat there, and the next builder used it.

## The order that may not have existed

North of Elam lay Media, and the Medes are the first thing Cyrus conquered. Everybody knows the story. There was a Median Empire, with a capital at Ecbatana, which had helped destroy Assyria and had inherited the northern half of its world; Cyrus was its vassal; he rebelled, defeated Astyages, took Ecbatana, and thereby acquired an empire to build on.

That account rests very largely on Herodotus, who was writing a century later, in Greek, from oral material, and who supplies the Medes with a founding king and a rise-to-power story of a shape he supplies to other peoples as well. From the 1980s a strand of Achaemenid scholarship — Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg's essay asking flatly whether there was ever a Median empire is the usual point of entry, and Christopher Tuplin and Robert Rollinger have argued the question back and forth since — has pressed the point that the cuneiform record does not describe a Median imperial state, and that the archaeology of Media has produced substantial settlement without producing the palaces, the administrative apparatus or the coherent material culture an empire of that description ought to have left. The Medes were unquestionably real, unquestionably powerful, and unquestionably instrumental in the destruction of Assyria. Whether they had built an empire, a hegemony, a loose domination or a coalition of chiefdoms is genuinely open, and this study will not adjudicate it.

But the possibility itself is a finding, and it is the sharpest disciplinary lesson in this landscape.

An empire is a good thing to have overthrown. It is a better thing to have overthrown than a confederacy of hill chiefs, and the man who overthrew it needs it to have been an empire in a way that nobody else does. Herodotus, writing for Greeks who had themselves fought the Persians, needed a sequence of world monarchies for his story to have a shape. The scheme by which Assyria was succeeded by Media, and Media by Persia, and Persia by Macedon, is a historiographical construction that later ages found congenial and inherited, and it may be sitting on top of a sixth-century reality that was messier and smaller.

This qualifies the recursion this collection works with. The rule has been that a conqueror never meets an aboriginal baseline, only an earlier build that took; and that rule is confirmed everywhere on this ground. But the rule needs a second clause, because a former build reaches us through the account of whoever ended it, and that account is sized to the ending. What survives of a defeated order is a description written to be worth reading by people who beat it.

## Babylonia, Lydia, Egypt

The other finished builds can be stated more briefly, because two of them are the subjects of the studies immediately preceding this one.

Babylonia was, in the middle of the sixth century, exactly as the previous study left it: an alluvial plain that cannot be farmed without leading water to it, carrying cities that were already ancient when Hammurabi was young, and a temple economy in which the Esagila at Babylon, the Ebabbar at Sippar and the Eanna at Uruk held land, herds, workshops and dependants, and in which a man's income came to him as a prebend — a share in a god's offerings, held by inheritance, saleable, divisible, and sourced from the god rather than from the king. That machine had already been Amorite, Kassite, Assyrian and Chaldean. Its liturgy had not missed a date through any of it. It kept its books in Akkadian on clay and it will keep them in Akkadian on clay for five centuries after the last Persian king is dead.

Lydia held western Anatolia from Sardis under the Mermnad kings, rich enough on the alluvial gold of the Pactolus that the first coined money in the world is generally credited to it, and it had a long build behind it and a network of Greek cities on the coast below it that it had spent generations bringing into some sort of dependence. Those Ionian cities are a distinct order again, with their own institutions and their own quarrels, and they will be a recurring problem for two hundred years.

Egypt is the deepest of them. Under the Saite dynasty in the sixth century it was a functioning independent kingdom with a temple establishment, a priestly class, a bureaucracy and a written tradition already two thousand years old, and it had absorbed and expelled an Assyrian conquest within living memory. It is the one part of the empire this study will find that repeatedly and successfully revolted, and the depth of its own prior build is the first thing to reach for when asking why.

And to the north lay the steppe, and the peoples on it, whom no settled empire in this collection has subdued and none will.

## The people the arrangement was made about

None of the above tells you what it was like to be governed, and there is a case in the record that shows it with unusual clarity because the previous studies have already assembled it.

Judah, in the middle of the sixth century, had no king, no temple and no independent existence, and had been the object of other people's arrangements for the better part of two centuries. It had paid Assyria; the Assyrian record and the Hebrew record agree that Hezekiah paid, and disagree, characteristically, about what happened

next. It had then been the object of the Babylonian settlement of the west, and after two rebellions its royal house was deported, its temple destroyed and a substantial part of its population moved to Babylonia and settled on the canals of the Nippur region. The previous study followed them: a place in the tablets called Āl-Yahūdu, the town of Judah, where deportees' families held plots of crown land against an obligation, farmed, married, lent silver and barley to their neighbours, and appear in the record generation after generation under one apex and then another.

That is the concrete meaning of the phrase *subject population* in this period, and it is worth stating plainly before any king is admired. A man on a plot at Āl-Yahūdu in 545 had lived under a Babylonian king, would shortly live under a Persian one, and would in due course leave descendants who lived under Macedonians, Seleucids, Parthians and Romans. Not one of those transitions was his to make or to resist. What he required from whoever was on top was that the water be led, the obligation be bearable, and nobody come through with an army. What he thought about the King of Kings is not recorded, was not solicited, and — this is the load-bearing point, and the whole study turns on it — was of no operational interest to anybody, because he was not the person the arrangement was made with.

The person the arrangement was made with was whoever led him. And who that was, was going to be decided by whoever held the country.

## What Assyria left lying about

The last thing to establish is that Cyrus did not have to invent the instruments of empire, because they were lying about where the last empire had dropped them, seventy years earlier, within living memory of old men.

The Assyrians had built the provincial system, with governors, tribute quotas and a standing obligation to supply men and materials. They had built roads and a relay of posts on them, and the Achaemenid *angareion* Herodotus praises is an inheritance improved rather than an invention. They had developed deportation into a systematic instrument of policy on a scale nothing before it approached — Bustenay Oded's collection of the attested cases yields a figure of roughly four and a half million people moved over about two and a half centuries, with the author's own margin around nine hundred thousand and the caution that it extrapolates from a boastful record. They had established the practice of settling deportees in blocks on land held against service, which is exactly the arrangement the Judaeans on the Nippur canals were living under and exactly the arrangement Persian records will show still running two centuries later.

And they had, without intending to, produced the empire's working language. Aramaic spread through the Assyrian world on the backs of the Aramean populations

Assyria itself moved, and it spread because it was written with an alphabet of a couple of dozen signs that a clerk could learn in weeks rather than a syllabary that took years in a scribal household. By the late Assyrian period the palace employed alphabetic scribes alongside cuneiform ones. Under the Achaemenids, Aramaic became the language in which the chancery spoke from Egypt to Bactria.

Which produces the problem that qualifies everything in this study, and it should be stated on the first page rather than buried. Aramaic was written in ink on leather and papyrus. Cuneiform was written on clay. Clay survives burial for two and a half thousand years and leather does not. The Persian empire's central administrative correspondence has therefore very largely perished, and what survives in bulk is the Elamite ration accounting of one provincial storehouse system in Fars, plus what happens to have been preserved by the exceptional dryness of Egypt. This study's picture of how the empire ran is shaped by which offices used which stationery, and every structural claim in it is discounted accordingly.

## The position of a king of Anshan

Which brings us at last to the man, and to the only way this collection knows how to approach him.

Strip out, first, what the Greeks wrote. Cyrus the generous, Cyrus the ideal king, the Cyrus of Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* — that is a Greek treatise on kingship using a Persian name, written by an Athenian, and it is evidence about Xenophon. Strip out equally the modern inversion, and the modern sentimentalisation, both of which are somebody's politics.

What is left is thin and useful. On his own cylinder from Babylon, Cyrus styles himself king of the city of Anshan and gives his father, grandfather and remoter ancestor the same title. Anshan is an Elamite city in Fars, and what the title implies about his family's origins is disputed — some scholars read it as evidence of an Elamite affiliation, others as a legitimising claim pitched at a Mesopotamian and Elamite audience, and the archaeology at the site has complicated both readings. What is not disputed is that the title is an Elamite one and that he chose it.

He appears in the contemporary record, before he is anybody, in a text of Nabonidus of Babylon, where he is called king of Anshan and given a description whose Akkadian is contested: it has been rendered as his young servant, as his little servant, and as his second in rank, and it is disputed whether the possessive refers to Astyages of the Medes or to the god Marduk. Both the ambiguity and the range are worth keeping. The founder of the largest empire the world had yet seen enters the

written record as a minor figure in somebody else's document, described in a phrase we cannot securely translate.

So fix the position. He is the hereditary ruler of a small kingdom on the south-western edge of the Iranian plateau, in a landscape whose agriculture depends on works that must be dug and then maintained for ever. He is not the head of a nation but the head of a house among a small number of Persian houses, each with its own following, whose support he requires and whose leaders can kill him. To his north is a Median power of contested size to which his line stands in some relation of subordination. To his west, across the Zagros, is Babylonia — the wealthiest agricultural and commercial economy in the world, with a temple establishment holding enormous assets and a king currently in dispute with its priesthood. Beyond that, Lydia and its gold. To the south-west, Egypt. To the north-east, a steppe frontier that cannot be closed. And lying about the whole region, unowned, are the roads, the provincial idea, the relay, the deportation apparatus, the service-land tenure and the scribal classes of an empire that had collapsed within the memory of men still living.

That is the position. It permits very little and requires a great deal. It requires him to hold his own magnates, because a Persian house that stops following him is not a policy problem but a mortal one. It requires him to keep the water flowing on the plateau, because that is what the plateau is. It requires him, if he moves at all, to move on somebody rich enough to pay the magnates for coming, because a following is not free. It punishes him severely for a long war, for an occupation that has to be garrisoned, and for the destruction of anything productive that he will subsequently have to rebuild at his own cost.

And it presents him with a menu of a very few options, all of them already invented by other people. Which of them he took, and at what price, is the subject of everything that follows.

## Reading the landscape against the framework

Three things this landscape contributes, and one it confirms.

**It confirms the recursion, and it adds a clause the collection needs.** There is no aboriginal baseline anywhere on this ground: Elam, Babylonia, Lydia and Egypt were completed builds, each of them long enough naturalised that the people inside them experienced them simply as the world, and each of them lying on top of an earlier build again. But Media forces an addition. What we know of a destroyed order reaches us in an account written by, or downstream of, whoever destroyed it — and that account is sized to the destruction. Ashurbanipal's ziggurat at Susa may not have stood at Susa; Herodotus's Median empire may not have been an empire. The rule to carry forward is

that **a defeated order's dimensions in the record are a function of the victor's need, not of the order**, and the working prediction that follows is precise: expect the first thing a founder overthrows to be reported, by him and by his tradition, as an empire. Before asking when a prior order was built and how it was naturalised, ask whether it existed at the scale described, and who required that it should have.

**It offers a settlement instrument the collection has not yet listed.** Beside vacancy, recognition, divisibility, endowment and grant, put *forbearance*: a term-limited exemption from the ruler's own extraction, conveyed to whoever will create the productive asset at his own cost and maintain it thereafter. Polybius's five generations is the specimen, and it must be held as a remembered practice rather than a documented decree until the archives are examined. But its structure is worth stating now because it is extreme in every direction. It costs the treasury nothing at the moment of granting; it transfers the entire capital cost, operating cost and risk to the holder; it can only be used where the asset does not yet exist, which means it is available precisely on the marginal ground a ruler would otherwise write off; and, unlike a grant, it does not extinguish the crown's claim but defers it. That last property generates a prediction the later modules can test, and it runs opposite to the finding on grants: **a granted title binds the holder and decays across generations, while a term-limited exemption binds the holder's descendants harder than the holder**, because the nearer the term-end, the more the family needs the renewal, and the renewal is the ruler's to give.

**It supplies the study's controlling constraint, which is distance measured in days.** Ninety days on foot from the western capital to the eastern one; a week or two for a courier; longer to Egypt, longer still to Bactria. Every satrap is therefore acting alone by default, and the King's field of the visible is composed almost entirely of documents written by the men he is trying to supervise. The relay refines this rather than solving it, and asymmetrically: a hundred and eleven post-houses accelerate short unambiguous instructions travelling outward far more than they improve long contestable reports travelling inward. The hypothesis to carry into Module 7 is that **the Achaemenid communications system is a command instrument before it is an information instrument**, and that the King's problem was never learning what had happened but verifying what he had been told.

And one methodological note that belongs here rather than later. Almost everything favourable ever written about the founder of this empire was written by him, by people he installed, or by Greeks composing political literature. That is not an argument that the favourable account is false. It is an observation about what survives, and it has a structural cause: an order's self-description is carved, copied, canonised and recopied by everyone with a stake in it, while the floor beneath it leaves ration receipts and burn

layers, which do not argue. The corroboration one seems to find across many sources is often a single interested claim, reproduced. The discipline for the modules that follow is to ask of every document not whether it is true but who produced it, what he was scored on, and what he would have been punished for writing instead.

## A note on sources.

Quoted exactly, from public-domain translations: Polybius, *Histories* 10.28, on the subterranean channels and the five-generation grant, in Evelyn Shuckburgh's translation (1889); Herodotus, *Histories* 5.52–53, on the royal road and the ninety days, in G. C. Macaulay's translation (1890). The single clause quoted from Ashurbanipal's annals on the ziggurat of Susa follows the reading in D. D. Luckenbill's *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* (1926–27) as cited in the specialist literature; the remainder of the Susa passage is paraphrased deliberately, because the version of it in general circulation is a smoothed composite whose exact wording cannot be checked against a single edition, and the project's rule is that a doubtful line is dropped rather than guessed. The description of Cyrus in the Sippar cylinder of Nabonidus is given as a range of published renderings rather than as a quotation, because both the Akkadian phrase and the referent of its possessive are disputed.

Paraphrased from modern scholarship, briefly and with credit: the qanat literature on construction and maintenance; the argument over the existence and extent of a Median empire, entered through Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg's 1988 essay and continued by Christopher Tuplin and Robert Rollinger, with Karen Radner on Assyria and the Medes; the Elamite–Iranian continuity argument associated with Wouter Henkelman and D. T. Potts, and Potts's work on Cyrus and Anshan; the dispute over the Anshan titulary, where the reading as a legitimising claim rather than an ethnic marker is argued against Potts by others and is left open here; the Persepolis Fortification Archive figures and dating from the Chicago publication programme and Richard Hallock's edition; and Michael Jursa's work on the Babylonian economy, carried over from the preceding study in this collection.

Figures, given as ranges because they are contested. The empire at its greatest extent is conventionally put at around five and a half million square kilometres. Its population is estimated at roughly seventeen million by McEvedy and Jones and at thirty to thirty-five million by G. G. Aperghis, with popular sources circulating a figure near fifty million that the scholarly range does not support; the honest statement is that we do not know within a factor of two. Assyrian deportation totals are Bustenay Oded's, about four and a half million over two and a half centuries with a stated margin of some nine hundred thousand, extrapolated from an incomplete and boastful record.

The Persepolis Fortification Archive is variously counted at twenty to thirty thousand tablets and fragments, representing perhaps fifteen to eighteen thousand original Elamite documents together with several hundred to a thousand in Aramaic, from the years 509 to 494. The date of Cyrus's campaign against Lydia, conventionally 547, rests on a damaged line of the Nabonidus Chronicle in which the country name is uncertain and has been read as Urartu; it is given here without a year.

MODULE 1

# Of Their Own Accord

*Module 1 · the floor of force — twenty-five years, four kingdoms, and the question of who was actually fighting*

## The arithmetic

Begin with the dates, because the dates are the problem this module exists to solve.

In 550 the king of Anshan defeated Astyages and took Ecbatana. Within a few years — the Babylonian chronicle's entry is damaged at exactly the point where the country's name should stand, and the reading has been disputed — he had taken Lydia and Sardis. In the autumn of 539 he took Babylon. In 530 he died on a campaign beyond the Araxes. In 525 his son took Egypt. In something on the order of twenty-five years a hereditary ruler of a small kingdom in Fars, and then his son, absorbed the Median power, the Lydian kingdom with the Greek cities under it, the Babylonian empire with the whole Levant in its hand, and the oldest state on earth.

Nothing about the tools explains that. There was no new weapon. Cavalry, archery, the siege mound, the field army and the supply train were all old, and every one of them was as available to Astyages, to Croesus, to Nabonidus and to Amasis as it was to Cyrus. Nor is there a plausible demographic answer: Persis was not populous, and the Persian nobility was a small class with a following of clients, not a nation in arms. A conquest of this speed at this ratio of forces has to be explained by something other than superiority in the field.

The explanation is available, and it is in the sources, and it is not flattering to anybody. In the great majority of these acquisitions there was no serious battle, because the party who would have had to fight had a better option and took it.

## The army that handed over its own king

The Babylonian chronicle covering the reign of Nabonidus — paraphrased here rather than quoted, because every English translation of it is modern and in copyright — records the fall of Astyages in a few flat clauses in the sixth year, which is 550/549. Astyages called up his troops and marched against Cyrus, king of Anshan, to give battle. His army revolted against him, put him in fetters and handed him over to Cyrus.

Cyrus then marched on Ecbatana, took the royal residence, and carried the silver, the gold and the valuables of the country back to Anshan.

That is the whole of it. There is a mustering and there is a march and then there is no battle, because the army changed sides on the field and delivered its own king bound to the man it had been sent to fight.

Herodotus tells the same event as a story with a cause: Harpagus, a great man of the Median court whom Astyages had punished by feeding him his own son, waited years and then betrayed him. Whether or not any part of that is true — it has the shape of a folk tale and it is doing narrative work — the Greek and the Babylonian sources agree on the structural fact, which is that Astyages was destroyed by his own establishment rather than by a Persian army.

Two things follow immediately, and both organise the rest of the conquest.

The first is that a country was acquired without the destruction of its administrative or military class, because that class was the instrument of acquisition. The second is visible within a year or two. When Cyrus turned west, the commanders who reduced Ionia for him were Mazares and then Harpagus, and Harpagus is the same Mede. The military capability of the country taken in 550 was pointed outward, under its own officers, almost at once. Herodotus notes the same recursion one level further down: once Harpagus had reduced the Ionians and Aeolians, they served in his army for the campaigns against the Carians, the Caunians and the Lycians. Each conquest supplies the manpower for the next. This is why the ratio of forces at the start does not constrain the outcome — the force is not a constant being expended but a quantity that grows with each acquisition, provided the acquisitions are made in a way that leaves the acquired capability intact and its officers in post.

## Sardis, and the cities that had nobody to hand over

Lydia is the first place the pattern breaks, and the break is instructive.

Croesus was not handed over by his army. He was beaten in the field, withdrew to Sardis, and the city was stormed. Herodotus's account of the campaign is full of Greek material — the oracles, the pyre, the wisdom of Solon recalled too late — that is doing moral work rather than reporting, and none of it needs to be believed for the outline to stand. What matters here is what happened afterwards, and it is the exception that establishes the rule.

Lydia revolted once Cyrus had gone east. It was put down. And then Harpagus went through the Greek cities of the coast one by one, and this is where the floor of force becomes visible, because for the first time in the conquest somebody had to be besieged. Herodotus describes the method plainly: mounds raised against the walls, and

the city taken over the top of them. Phocaea was abandoned by a large part of its population, who put to sea rather than submit, and the same is told of Teos, whose people are said to have sailed away and founded Abdera. In Lycia the people of Xanthus are described as destroying their own families and property and dying in the fighting. Herodotus adds, in a phrase that should not be read past, that Harpagus laid waste the lower part of Asia; and he then says that he will not go through every nation subdued but only those that gave trouble or did something worth recording — which means that the record of this campaign is explicitly a selection, and the unrecorded part is not the peaceful part.

So what distinguishes Ionia from Media? Not ferocity and not culture. Structure. Media had one man at the top whose position could be re-sourced and a body of magnates who could deliver him. An Ionian polis had no such man. It had an assembly, or a faction fight, or a tyrant whose authority rested on the citizens rather than on a hierarchy above him, and there was nobody in it who could hand over the city and remain what he was afterwards. There was, in the exact sense, nobody to make the offer to. So the offer was not made, and the mounds went up.

Cyrus's own recorded remark on the Greeks belongs here, and it is quoted exactly, in Macaulay's translation, because it says two things at once. When a Spartan herald came to Sardis to warn him against harming any Greek city, Herodotus says Cyrus first asked the Greeks in his own retinue what men the Lacedaemonians were and how many, and then answered: *Never yet did I fear men such as these, who have a place appointed in the midst of their city where they gather together and deceive one another by false oaths: and if I continue in good health, not the misfortunes of the Ionians will be for them a subject of talk, but rather their own.*

The contempt is the famous half and the less interesting one. The important half is the question that precedes it. The conqueror of western Asia had to ask who the Spartans were. His field of vision at Sardis in the 540s did not contain them, and it did not contain them because nothing in his position had ever required it to. And what he says when the answer is supplied is not a slur on Greek courage so much as a statement about what he can see and cannot: a body of men who gather in a public place and settle things among themselves by argument is, to him, a thing without a head — which is precisely, and correctly, the structural feature that made such places expensive to take.

## Opis, and two cities that were not defended

Babylonia in 539 was the richest target on earth and it took about three weeks.

The chronicle's sequence, again paraphrased: in the month of Tashritu the Persians engaged the army of Akkad at Opis on the Tigris; there is a clause about the people of Akkad and a killing, whose reading and whose subject are disputed in the modern editions, and the plunder was taken. On the fourteenth day Sippar was seized without a battle and Nabonidus fled. On the sixteenth day Ugbaru, governor of Gutium, entered Babylon with Cyrus's army without a battle. Cyrus himself entered on the third day of the following month.

Set the two halves side by side. At Opis there was a field army under royal command, in the open, with the capital behind it and nowhere to go, and at Opis there was a battle and a slaughter — the one unambiguous atrocity in the whole conquest narrative, recorded not by an enemy but in a Babylonian chronicle compiled under the new regime. Two days later a great city opened its gates, and two days after that so did the greatest city in the world.

The previous study in this collection explains why, and the explanation is the same mechanism seen from inside. Babylon's coordinating class held its income from prebends sourced in the gods, not from the king; a change of ruler cost the prebendary nothing; and Nabonidus had spent ten years at Tema in Arabia while the New Year festival went unperformed. There was no party in Babylon whose position depended on Nabonidus personally, and there was therefore no party in Babylon that had anything to gain by fighting. The city was not betrayed. It was simply not defended, which is different and worse for the theory that empires rest on the loyalty of their subjects.

What Opis shows is where the floor lives. It is not distributed across the population. It concentrates at the one point in the system where no re-sourcing is possible — a body of soldiers in the field who cannot become anything other than Nabonidus's soldiers by staying and cannot go home by leaving. Those men were killed. Everybody else changed counterparty.

## The fleet Persia did not have

Egypt is the case that tests the seed's proposition about how an inherited floor extends its radius, and it confirms it in the sharpest possible way, along with the price.

Persia was a land power out of a plateau. It had no navy, no maritime tradition and no coast worth the name until it took Ionia and the Levant. Egypt cannot be attacked seriously without ships and cannot be reached at all without crossing the Sinai. Cambyses solved the second problem, on Herodotus's account, by an arrangement with an Arabian ruler who undertook to supply water along the desert road — that is,

by contracting with a local power rather than by developing a logistical capacity — and he solved the first by using other people's fleets.

Whose fleets is the point. The Phoenician cities had come over to Persia; Herodotus is explicit that they had done so voluntarily. Cyprus likewise. Polycrates of Samos sent forty triremes, and Herodotus says he manned them with the citizens he most suspected of wanting to overthrow him and asked Cambyses not to send them back — a detail worth keeping, because it shows a client using the imperial expedition to solve his own internal problem, which is a great deal of what a client is for. And an Egyptian, Phanes of Halicarnassus, went over from Amasis's service and told the Persians how to do it.

Then there is Udjahorresnet, and he is the single most valuable document in this module. He was a Saite Egyptian of the highest official class — priest of Neith at Sais, chief physician, and commander of the royal fleet under Amasis and his son. He went over to Cambyses. He then served the Persian king, arranged his Egyptian titulary, had foreigners removed from the temple precinct of Neith and its revenues restored, and continued in office into the reign of Darius, under whom he set up a statue at Sais recording all of it in his own words. The English translations are modern and in copyright, so the content is paraphrased here: he records that the great chief of all foreign lands, Cambyses, came into Egypt with the foreigners of every land; that he himself was appointed to a position beside him; that he petitioned the king about the temple of Neith and got what he asked for; and that he acted throughout for the good of his city and his gods.

There is a long argument about whether that inscription is collaboration dressed as piety or piety operating under occupation, and this study does not need to settle it, because on the reading being tested here the two are not opposites. A man in his position had a temple, an office, a city and a family, and a new counterparty had arrived who was in a position to confirm or destroy all four. He went and got them confirmed, and then wrote a monument saying so, in Egyptian, in the traditional autobiographical form, for an Egyptian audience — which tells you that the audience he expected did not regard what he had done as shameful.

Now the price of the borrowed capability, and it is stated by the sources with perfect clarity. Cambyses, having taken Egypt, ordered the fleet against Carthage. In Macaulay's translation: *but the Phenicians said that they would not do so, for they were bound not to do so by solemn vows, and they would not be acting piously if they made expedition against their own sons: and as the Phenicians were not willing, the rest were rendered unequal to the attempt. Thus then the Carthaginians escaped being enslaved by the Persians; for Cambyses did not think it right to apply force to compel the Phenicians,*

*both because they had delivered themselves over to the Persians of their own accord and because the whole naval force was dependent upon the Phenicians.*

That is the whole mechanism in four lines, and it should be read slowly. The King of Persia gives an order to a subject people and the subject people declines, and the order is not enforced. Herodotus supplies two reasons and they are the same reason twice: the Phoenicians had come in voluntarily, and the entire navy was theirs. A capability acquired by taking over the people who possess it is not thereby possessed. It remains in their hands, it is exercised at their discretion, and every use of it is a request. The empire's reach across water was, from the day it was acquired, contingent on the continued willingness of a subject nation that had never been beaten in the first place.

Anyone reading forward from here already knows what that guarantees. Ionia revolts in 499 and the fleet is the problem. Salamis is fought with Phoenician and Ionian ships. Egypt is lost and retaken repeatedly across the fourth century. The recurring maritime failures of this empire are not incompetence; they are the standing invoice on an instrument it borrowed and never built.

## Where the floor stops

The empire's edges are the same finding inverted, and they are remarkably consistent.

Cyrus died beyond the Araxes fighting the Massagetae. Herodotus gives one version at length, involving Queen Tomyris and a head in a skin of blood, and himself says that several accounts of Cyrus's death exist and that this is the one he finds most credible — an admission of uncertainty that should be honoured rather than smoothed. What is not in doubt is that he died on a steppe frontier and that the frontier was not taken.

Cambyses sent a force against the Ammonians which, in Herodotus's telling, vanished in the desert, and an expedition south against the Ethiopians that ran out of supplies and turned back in a condition Herodotus describes with some horror. Darius crossed the Danube against the Scythians about 513 and achieved nothing except the withdrawal of his army; the Scythians simply moved. And the empire never held the Greek mainland.

The conventional explanation is logistical — deserts, steppes, sea. That is true as far as it goes and it is not sufficient, because the Persians crossed enormous deserts to reach Egypt and enormous distances to reach the Indus. Put the failures beside the successes and a second regularity appears, and it is the same one that explains Opis and Ionia.

Every one of the great cheap acquisitions was made from a hierarchy with a single resourceable head: a Median king with a court, a Lydian king with a capital, a Babylonian king with a bureaucracy, a Saite pharaoh with a priesthood and a fleet commander.

Every one of the failures was against a people that presented no such head. The Massagetae, the Scythians, the Ammonians and the Ethiopians of Herodotus's account are, whatever else they were, societies without a purchasable seat — no capital to enter, no treasury to confirm in possession, no official whose position could be guaranteed because the position did not exist in a form the King could underwrite. And the Greek cities, for entirely different reasons, presented the same difficulty in a different idiom.

Against such a target the cheap instrument is unavailable and only the expensive one is left, which is the actual application of force to a population that will not stay still to receive it. That is the most expensive thing any state can do, and this empire did not do it well, and there is no reason to think any pre-modern empire could have.

## Reading the floor against the framework

Four things, one of which revises a standing proposition and one of which is new.

**The floor is not distributed evenly across a conquest; it concentrates where nothing can be re-sourced, and those places can be identified in advance.** This is the module's central finding and it should be stated as a rule. *Resistance to a conquest varies inversely with the switchability of the local apex.* Where the target has a single head whose title can be taken from one hand and placed in another without the head being replaced, the country changes hands with little or no fighting: Media in 550, Sippar and Babylon in 539, Phoenicia and Cyprus without a recorded campaign, Egypt at the level of its own admiral. Where there is no such head, force is applied and it is applied brutally: a field army at Opis that could neither defect nor disperse, and the Ionian and Carian and Lycian cities where no individual could deliver the community and remain himself afterwards. The consequence for the framework is that the floor should stop being pictured as a general downward pressure on the ruled. It is a set of localised applications at the joints where the cheap instrument does not reach, and the reputation of a conqueror for mildness is very largely a measure of how many of those joints his opponents' structures spared him.

**The empire's outer boundary is drawn by the same rule and not by logistics alone.** *An inherited floor terminates against societies that present no re-sourceable apex*, because against them the cheap instrument is unavailable and only the expensive one remains. The steppe was not unconquered because the nomads fought better; it was unconquered because there was nobody there to whom the standing offer could be made. This is a refinement rather than a replacement of the seed's hypothesis, which held that reach is a bundle of capabilities assembled against the obstacles the builder faced. Both are operating. But of the two, the absence of a counterparty is the harder constraint, because a capability can be bought and a counterparty cannot be conjured.

**A capability acquired by conquering its owners comes with a veto, and the seed's hypothesis is confirmed with that amendment.** The proposition was that an inheritor extends his radius not by developing a new capability but by conquering the people who already have it. Persia crossed water by acquiring Phoenicia, Cyprus, Ionia and Egypt, and the confirmation is exact. The amendment is Herodotus 3.19: when the King ordered his fleet against Carthage the fleet declined and he did not compel it, on the express grounds that its owners had come in voluntarily and that the whole naval force was theirs. **A borrowed capability is exercised at the lender's discretion, and every command in that dimension is in substance a request.** The prediction this generates is testable across the rest of the study and appears to hold: an empire whose reach in one dimension is wholly borrowed will fail repeatedly and specifically in that dimension, and will read its failures as disloyalty rather than as the terms of the loan.

**And the position, stated as position logic requires it.** Cyrus in the 550s is not a nation's leader but the head of a house among houses, dependent on a following that must be paid and on magnates who can kill him. That position forbids a long war, forbids an occupation requiring garrisons, forbids the destruction of anything he will have to rebuild at his own cost, and requires him to move on wealth, because a following is not free and an unemployed magnate is a danger. There is exactly one move that pays on every one of those accounts at once: approach the man already in place, leave him where he is, confirm him, and take the tribute. It costs no siege, keeps the machine running, converts the target's own army into your next army, and gives your magnates a share without giving them a country. It is not generosity and it is not a philosophy of tolerance. It is the only affordable option on the menu, and it was found, as this collection keeps finding, by a man with a problem rather than by a man with an idea.

## A note on sources.

Quoted exactly, from a public-domain translation: Herodotus, *Histories* 1.153 on the Spartan herald at Sardis, and 3.19 on the Phoenician refusal to sail against Carthage, both in G. C. Macaulay's translation of 1890. These are the module's two load-bearing quotations and both are Greek testimony written a century after the events; the second is used for its structural content, which the Persian record does not contradict, rather than for its dramatic framing.

Paraphrased and not quoted, for a copyright reason stated on the face of this note: the Nabonidus Chronicle, throughout. Every published English translation of it — Sidney Smith's, A. Leo Oppenheim's in Pritchard, A. K. Grayson's, Jean-Jacques

Glassner's — is either modern and in copyright or not verifiable here in its exact wording, and the project's rule forbids reconstructing a primary text from memory. Its content is therefore given in summary, and readers should be aware that the clause about the killing at Opis is disputed both in its reading and in the identity of its subject, and that the entry for Nabonidus's ninth year, conventionally used to date the Lydian campaign to 547, is damaged at the country name and has been read as Urartu. The autobiographical inscription of Udjahorresnet on the Vatican naophorous statue is likewise paraphrased, because the standard English versions are modern.

Paraphrased from modern scholarship, briefly and with credit: the debate over Udjahorresnet's conduct and its interpretation, entered through the open-access volume *Udjahorresnet and His World* edited by Melanie Wasmuth and Pearce Paul Creasman; the argument over the existence of a Median empire, carried forward from the landscape; and the Neo-Babylonian prebendary evidence, carried over from the preceding study in this collection.

Figures and dates. The fall of Astyages is dated to Nabonidus's sixth year, 550/549. The Lydian campaign is conventionally 547 and is given here without a firm year for the reason stated above. The fall of Babylon is dated by the chronicle to the month of Tashritu in 539, with Sippar taken on the fourteenth, Babylon on the sixteenth, and Cyrus's own entry on the third of the following month. Cyrus died in 530; Cambyses took Egypt in 525; Darius's Scythian campaign is conventionally placed around 513. No casualty figure is given for Opis, for the Ionian sieges or for any other action in this module, because none is recoverable: the chronicle does not count, Herodotus does not count, and any number offered would be invented.

MODULE 2

# Toll, Tribute, or Custom

*Module 2 · the settlement — who got what, who held it of whom, and why the Persian answer is written almost entirely as a list of people who did not have to pay*

## What there was to divide

A conquest creates a distribution problem before it creates anything else. The men who did the fighting expect payment; the men who changed sides expect confirmation; the machinery that produces the revenue has to keep running while both are satisfied. The settlement is the answer to that problem, and it is the most revealing document any order produces, because it shows without argument whose position the order was actually built to protect.

The usual answer in the ancient world is land. Assyria moved populations and planted its own. Rome settled colonies of veterans on confiscated territory. The Norman settlement of England is a redistribution of the soil, recorded field by field. A conqueror takes the ground and gives it to his followers, and the followers thereafter defend the order because the order is what makes their possession lawful.

The Achaemenid settlement is not shaped like that, and the difference is the subject of this module. At the moment of conquest very little land changed hands. The Babylonian temples kept their estates; the prebendaries kept their prebends; the Egyptian priesthoods kept their endowments, and where those were cut, the cut was reversed within a generation. The men who ran the conquered provinces before the conquest very largely ran them after it. What was distributed instead was of three kinds: positions, revenue streams, and — most cheaply and most importantly — exemptions.

Read the surviving instruments of the settlement together and the arrangement reads less like a division of property than like a schedule of who has been relieved of an obligation. That is the module's finding and it is worth putting up front, because it explains a great deal that is otherwise attributed to Persian temperament.

## Persis pays nothing

Begin at the top, with the conquerors themselves.

Herodotus, having listed Darius's twenty satrapies and their assessments, closes the list with a sentence that is usually read past. In A. D. Godley's translation: *The Persian*

*country is the only one which I have not recorded as tributary; for the Persians live free from all taxes.*

That is the first line of the settlement. The conquering nation is outside the fiscal system entirely. Whatever Persis contributed it contributed as gift, which is to say at a rate and on an occasion of its own choosing, and gifts of that kind are exchanged rather than levied. Everyone else was assessed.

Herodotus also preserves what the Persians are supposed to have said about the man who drew up the assessment, and it is worth having exactly, in George Rawlinson's translation: *the Persians say that Darius was a huckster, Cambyses a master, and Cyrus a father; for Darius looked to making a gain in everything; Cambyses was harsh and reckless; while Cyrus was gentle, and procured them all manner of goods.*

Three kings and three registers, and the register that draws the insult is the accountant's. But note who is doing the insulting. This is not the complaint of a taxed province about the burden of taxes. It is reported as a Persian saying, made by the very class the assessment exempted, about the king who introduced fixed rates for everybody else — and the objection is not to the rates but to the *fixing*, to a relationship with subjects that has become a schedule rather than a series of transactions. What the Persian nobility appears to have missed about Cyrus is exactly what a fixed assessment removes: the discretion, the occasion, the personal exchange of gift for favour. A schedule is impersonal, and an impersonal system is one in which a great man's standing with the king matters less.

Both statements need discounting. Herodotus is a Greek writing fifty years and more after Darius, and the claim that Cyrus and Cambyses took no regular revenue at all is doubted across the modern literature; there was taxation before Darius, and the Persepolis material shows dues being collected in Persis itself, which sits awkwardly with a blanket exemption. What survives the discounting is the shape: the conquerors stood in a different fiscal relation to the crown from everybody else, and the difference was understood on both sides as a mark of what they were.

## The land nobody was given

What, then, did the Persian nobility actually get?

In the first instance, positions. The satrapies, the garrison commands, the fortress treasuries, the court offices. Darius's own account of his accession, cut into the cliff at Behistun — paraphrased here, because the standard English translation is modern and in copyright — describes his restoration of what a usurper had taken: the sanctuaries rebuilt, and the pastures, herds, household people and houses given back to those they had been taken from, and the royal house re-established on its foundation. It is a

statement about restoration of holdings, and the holdings it names are the ordinary furniture of aristocratic wealth. But it is also, read structurally, a statement about who does the restoring. The things come back because the King puts them back.

In the second instance, estates — but granted, over time, out of crown land and conquered royal domain rather than taken from existing holders wholesale. Persian nobles and members of the royal house came to hold substantial properties across the empire, worked by dependants and managed at a distance by agents. The best-documented case is Arshama, a prince of the royal house and satrap of Egypt in the later fifth century, whose instructions to his estate managers in Egypt survive as Aramaic letters written in ink on leather — orders about the running of his properties issued from Babylonia to Egypt by post. That is the settlement at the top of the pyramid: a great man holds land in a province he governs, does not live there, and manages it by correspondence.

And in every case the holding is held of the King. This is the point on which the Achaemenid settlement differs most sharply from the feudal settlements it superficially resembles. A satrapy is an office. An estate of this kind is a benefaction. Both can be withdrawn, and both were: the record of the fifth and fourth centuries is full of satraps executed, replaced and dispossessed. The Persian aristocracy was extremely rich and, at the level of legal security, held its wealth on terms no Norman baron would have accepted. What it received was not property but access.

## The bow, the horse and the chariot

Below that level, the settlement becomes documentary, and the documents are Babylonian.

From the archive of the Murashu house at Nippur — some hundreds of tablets covering roughly 454 to 405, found in one room and constituting the best evidence we have for rural Achaemenid Babylonia — we can see the tenure system by which land was held against military obligation. The units have names that describe what they were for: bow land, horse land, chariot land. A holder of bow land owed the crown an archer; horse land, a cavalryman with his mount; chariot land, the crew and equipment of a chariot. The holdings were grouped into associations under officials responsible for the delivery, and they were heritable and divisible.

Two things about this system matter more than its details.

The first is that Persia did not invent it. Land held against service obligation is old in Mesopotamia; the Neo-Babylonian and Assyrian states both had versions of it, and the deported Judaeans settled on crown land on the Nippur canals in the sixth century — the Āl-Yahūdu material examined in the preceding study — were already holding plots

against an obligation before a Persian ever governed them. The Achaemenid contribution was to inherit a working tenure system, keep it, and substitute the King at the top of it. The settlement of Babylonia consisted very largely in changing whose name appeared in the formula.

The second is what the system had become by the time we can see it. In the Murashu material the obligation is routinely commuted. The holder does not go; he pays, and a substitute goes, or silver goes in place of a man. The Murashu firm itself operates in exactly this gap, advancing silver against the harvest to holders who need to meet their obligations and taking leases and pledges in return. A tenure created to produce soldiers has become, within a century and a half, a tenure that produces revenue and a market in the discharge of duty.

That drift is the most important single fact in this module and it should be flagged for the modules on collapse. A settlement that pays the crown in men is self-renewing: the land produces the army that defends the land. A settlement that pays in silver is not, because silver has to be spent on somebody, and the somebody will be whoever is selling. In the fourth century the men selling military service in this part of the world were increasingly Greek, and an empire that fielded Greek mercenaries against Greek invaders had, at some point earlier and invisibly, stopped being defended by its own settlement.

## Egypt: the law written down twice

Egypt supplies the settlement's clearest sequence, because the Egyptian priesthood kept its own account of what was done to it.

The first act was a cut. A Demotic text on the reverse of a papyrus in Paris records that Cambyses curtailed the revenues that the Egyptian temples had received from the crown under Amasis, exempting only a small number of the greatest houses — Memphis, Heliopolis and one other — from the reduction. The document is later than the events, comes from a priestly milieu, and belongs with a body of Ptolemaic-era Egyptian literature that is hostile to the Persians and calls them Medes. It is not a neutral witness. But it is a witness against the story a hostile priesthood would have found most useful, because it records a specific administrative measure with named exceptions rather than a general blasphemy, and administrative measures with named exceptions are what real decrees look like.

Its significance for this module is exact. The temple revenue in question was not the temples' own land; it was a subsidy from the crown. Cambyses did not confiscate anything. He stopped paying, and stopped paying selectively, retaining the three houses whose goodwill was worth most. That is the exemption instrument being operated in

reverse, and it demonstrates the property that makes the instrument so useful to a ruler: what is conveyed by exemption can be withdrawn by a stroke of the pen, without confiscation, without force, and without giving the injured party anything to sue over.

The second act was a restoration, and it went further. The same Demotic material records that in his third year Darius instructed his satrap in Egypt to assemble wise men from among the warriors, the priests and the scribes, and to set down in writing the law of Egypt as it had stood down to the forty-fourth year of Amasis — that is, as it stood on the eve of the conquest — and that the result was to be written in Demotic and in Aramaic.

Read that arrangement slowly, because it is the settlement in its purest form and it is doing four things at once. It conveys to the Egyptian elite the thing they most wanted, which is that their own law and not a foreign one governs them. It costs the crown nothing, since the law already existed and the work was done by Egyptians. It fixes the law as at a date before the conquest, which flatters the conquered by treating the Saite order as the standard and simultaneously freezes it, so that what counts as Egyptian law is thereafter a document rather than a living practice the priesthood controls. And the Aramaic copy puts that law into the hands of the King's own officials, who are largely not Egyptians, and who can now administer Egypt by reading it.

The conqueror does not impose his law. He has yours written down, in your language and in his, and keeps a copy.

## Toll, tribute, or custom

Judah gives us the settlement stated as a legal instrument, and the wording is exact and public domain, and it names both sides of the bargain.

The rescript attributed to Artaxerxes in the seventh chapter of Ezra provides for the temple at Jerusalem out of the royal revenue of the province Beyond the River, and then gives the reason and the exemption in two consecutive verses. In the Authorised Version: *Whatsoever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be diligently done for the house of the God of heaven: for why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons? Also we certify you, that touching any of the priests and Levites, singers, porters, Nethinims, or ministers of this house of God, it shall not be lawful to impose toll, tribute, or custom, upon them.*

Set the two sentences side by side and the whole architecture is visible. The consideration flowing to the crown is stated with startling frankness: the cult is maintained so that the god will not be angry with the king and his house. The consideration flowing the other way is a comprehensive fiscal immunity for an entire named professional class, from the high priesthood down to the temple servants. An

earlier decree in the same book, attributed to Darius, goes further still and provides the sacrificial animals and the wheat, salt, wine and oil out of the king's own revenue, day by day, at the priests' own specification.

Everything in this study's argument is in that arrangement. The King does not believe in this god in any sense that would satisfy a theologian, and does not need to. He is buying a service — intercession, and with it the quiet of a province — and paying for it in the two currencies that cost a treasury least at the moment of payment: a subsidy drawn from the province's own tribute, and an exemption from a tax not yet collected. And the beneficiary class, having been given both, now has a position that exists because the King says so.

The provenance must be stated squarely. The Aramaic documents embedded in Ezra are contested. One body of scholarship holds them to be genuine chancery instruments, or edited versions of genuine ones, on the grounds that their formulae, vocabulary and administrative assumptions fit what is independently known of Achaemenid practice. Another holds that they are later compositions written to give the post-exilic community's arrangements a royal warrant. The question is not settled and this study does not settle it. But the alternatives are less far apart than they look for the present purpose. If the rescript is genuine, it is the settlement's own paperwork. If it is a later composition, it is a document in which a subject priesthood set down what it believed, or wished it to be believed, that the imperial arrangement had been — and a forgery has to be plausible to its audience, which means the shape of the bargain it describes was the shape that a Persian-period Judaean would recognise. Either way it tells us what the arrangement looked like from underneath.

Which is the answer to the question the seed put. The Judaean elite of the Persian period did not love the King of Kings. It held a fiscal immunity and a subsidy from him, and its leading men held their offices at his appointment. Those are not the same thing as loyalty and they do not need to be, because they work whether or not anybody feels anything.

## The document that may be Roman

One more instrument belongs here, and it belongs here as a discipline rather than as evidence.

The single most-quoted proof of the Achaemenid settlement's generosity to subject cults is a Greek inscription from near Magnesia on the Maeander, in which the King of Kings, Darius son of Hystaspes, rebukes his servant Gadatas: he praises him for transplanting fruit trees from beyond the Euphrates to the Asian coast, and then reproves him for having levied tribute on the sacred gardeners of Apollo and set them

to till profane ground, in disregard of the attitude of the King's ancestors towards the god.

It is a beautiful document. It says exactly what the tolerance thesis wants said: a satrap taxed a temple's dependants, the King found out, and the King intervened on the temple's side. It is a fiscal exemption enforced from the top against the King's own revenue officer.

And the stone is a Greek inscription of the second century AD, roughly six hundred years after the reign it purports to record. Pierre Briant, after examining it, argued in 2003 that it is a Roman-period fabrication and cannot be used as evidence for Achaemenid practice; others, including Robin Lane Fox and Christopher Tuplin, have defended it as a later republication of a genuine letter; the argument continues, and a phrase in it that appears to render an Aramaic administrative term has been read on both sides. The honest position is that its evidentiary standing is disputed and that a case which needs it is a weaker case than it looks.

The reason to include it is that it demonstrates the mechanism this project keeps returning to. A community with a stake in an arrangement produces documents describing that arrangement favourably, and it goes on producing them for centuries after the arrangement has ended, and some of what it produces then enters the record as testimony from the arrangement itself. The Persians did not need to forge anything for their reputation to grow. Other people's descendants did the work, for their own reasons, in their own idiom, long after.

## Reading the settlement against the framework

Three contributions, one confirmation, and a prediction.

**The settlement is a schedule of exemptions rather than a distribution of property, and this is the general instrument of any conqueror who inherits a running machine.** The landscape identified forbearance — a term-limited exemption from the ruler's own extraction, conveyed to whoever will build the asset — as the cheapest settlement instrument available where the productive capital does not yet exist. This module generalises it to where the capital already does. *Where the conquered order's assets are already held and worked by an identifiable class, the conqueror's cheapest settlement conveys exemption rather than ownership*, because an exemption costs him nothing at the moment of granting, is drawn against a revenue stream he has not yet begun to collect, and creates a class with a stake in his survival at zero capital outlay. Persis exempt from the assessment; the temple personnel at Jerusalem exempt from toll, tribute and custom; the Egyptian great houses exempt from Cambyses's reduction; the

sacred gardeners of Apollo exempt, if the stone is genuine, from a satrap's levy. Read the settlement as a map of immunities and it is nearly complete.

**And the reason a ruler prefers it is that an exemption is revocable and a grant is not.** This is the sting in the instrument and it is what makes it a hold rather than a gift. Cambyses stopped the Egyptian temple subsidies; Darius restored them. Nothing was confiscated, nobody was dispossessed, no army moved, and the beneficiary class was reminded, twice in twenty years, that its position was a schedule the crown maintained. **A class settled by exemption lives permanently at the ruler's discretion, which is precisely the leverage a grant of property would have destroyed.** That is the deepest structural reason why this empire could hold enormous territory with a very small ruling nation, and it should be carried into the modules on the cost column and on elite coordination.

**A settlement that names its own consideration is rare, and this one does.** The Jerusalem rescript says why the crown is paying: so that the god shall not be angry with the king and his sons. Whether the document is a chancery original or a later composition, it states the transaction in terms neither party would have found embarrassing, and it should be set against the whole modern habit of reading Achaemenid cult policy as a disposition. The King is not tolerant of Yahweh. He is a subscriber.

**The service settlement decays into a fiscal settlement, and the decay is the empire's slow fault.** Bow land, horse land and chariot land are created to produce archers, cavalry and chariot crews. Within a century and a half the obligation is discharged in silver, substitutes are hired, and a private banking house at Nippur finances the discharge. The prediction this generates, to be tested in the modules on cost and collapse: *an empire whose land settlement has been commuted from service to cash must purchase its military capability on a market, and will end up buying it from whoever sells it, including its enemies.* Set beside the previous module's finding that this empire's naval capability was borrowed from the day it was acquired, a pattern begins to form that has nothing to do with decadence and everything to do with the terms on which the thing was originally set up.

**And the confirmation.** The seed proposed that the Achaemenid hold on a subject people is best read as a guarantee sold to that people's own elite, and that the elite's tie to the King is a business relation rather than an allegiance. Every instrument examined in this module is consistent with that and none requires anything more. What the Egyptian priesthood received was its law written down and its subsidies restored. What the Judaean priesthood received was an endowment and an immunity. What the Babylonian holder of bow land received was a plot and an obligation. What the Persian

noble received was an office he could lose. Not one of those is a bond of affection, and not one of them needed to be, and that is the whole efficiency of the design — until the day somebody else arrives who can offer the same terms, which is where this study is eventually going.

## A note on sources.

Quoted exactly, from public-domain sources: Herodotus, *Histories* 3.97 on the Persians living free from taxes, in A. D. Godley's Loeb translation of 1921; Herodotus 3.89 on the huckster, the master and the father, in George Rawlinson's translation; and Ezra 7, verses 23 and 24, in the Authorised Version. Herodotus's claim that Cyrus and Cambyses levied no fixed tribute at all is disputed across the modern literature and is not adopted here; the surviving point is the exceptional fiscal standing of Persis, which is itself qualified by evidence of dues collected within Persis in the Persepolis material.

Paraphrased and not quoted, for stated reasons: the Behistun inscription, because the standard English translation is Roland Kent's of 1950 and is in copyright, while the public-domain edition of King and Thompson could not be verified here in its exact wording; the Demotic material on the reverse of Bibliothèque Nationale papyrus 215, covering both Cambyses's reduction of temple revenues and Darius's order for the codification of Egyptian law, because the published translations are modern; the Ezra 6 provisions for sacrificial supplies from the royal revenue, given in summary with the chapter cited so that a reader may check the wording; and the Murashu material, which is published in modern editions. The letter to Gadatas is described rather than quoted at length because its authenticity is disputed and this study does not rest anything on it.

Paraphrased from modern scholarship, briefly and with credit: Matthew Stolper's work on the Murashu archive and on Achaemenid Babylonia; the Arshama correspondence as published by the Oxford project on that archive; Pierre Briant's 2003 argument that the Gadatas inscription is a Roman-period fabrication, together with the responses of Robin Lane Fox and Christopher Tuplin; Muhammad Dandamaev and Josef Wiesehöfer on Achaemenid taxation and on whether the Persians were in fact exempt; and Wouter Henkelman on the crown's provision for non-Persian cults in the Persepolis Fortification texts, which supports the reading of subsidy as an instrument rather than a courtesy.

Dates and figures, with their uncertainties. The Murashu archive runs from about 454 to 405 and comprises several hundred tablets, counted variously between roughly 650 and 880 depending on what is included. Cambyses's Egyptian temple measure belongs to his Egyptian years, 525 to 522. Darius's codification order is placed in his third year, about 519. The rescript in Ezra 7 is dated to the seventh year of an

Artaxerxes, which is either 458 or 398 depending on which king is meant, and the identification is contested; nothing in this module turns on it. No total is given for the number of service holdings in Babylonia or for the revenue foregone by any of the exemptions discussed, because no such total is recoverable.

MODULE 3

# Though Thou Hast Not Known Me

*Module 3 · the robe — two theologies written for one conqueror within a decade, why an empire that inherits working cults rents them rather than replacing them, and what it costs a man to believe that his own god arranged his defeat*

## Two documents, one man

Some time shortly after October 539 a clay cylinder was inscribed in Akkadian and buried in the foundations of the Esagila, the temple of Marduk at Babylon. It was dug out of the ground by Hormuzd Rassam in 1879 and is in the British Museum. In Robert William Rogers's translation of 1912, which is out of copyright and can therefore be given at the length the argument needs, its central passage runs:

*On account of their complaints, the lords of the gods became furiously angry and left their land; the gods, who dwelt among them, left their homes... Marduk ... to all the dwelling places, which had become ruins, and the people of Sumer and Akkad, who were like corpses ... he turned and granted mercy. In all lands everywhere he searched; he looked through them and sought a righteous prince after his own heart, whom he took by the hand. He called Cyrus, king of Anshan, by name; he appointed him to lordship over the whole world.*

Now set beside it a Hebrew text, written by an anonymous prophet whose work was appended to the book of Isaiah, and preserved in the Authorised Version:

*That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure... Thus saith the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut... For Jacob my servant's sake, and Israel mine elect, I have even called thee by thy name: I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known me.*

The same man. Roughly the same decade. Two gods, two languages, two priesthoods, and one identical proposition: that the conquest of Babylon was not the act of a Persian king with an army and a fiscal problem, but the deliberate work of the local god, who was angry with the previous regime, who searched, who chose, and who took the conqueror by the hand and called him by his name.

Neither document was written by a Persian. Neither was written for Persians. That is where this module begins.

## The robe the empire did not have to write

The framework expects a conquering order to produce a doctrine that makes its force cheap, and it expects that doctrine to be cut for whoever's belief the order actually needs. In the colonial cases in this collection the prediction is a reversed robe: cut for the metropole, whose taxes and sons pay for the conquest, and not for the conquered, whose belief the floor does not require.

The Achaemenid case does something the collection has not yet had to name. The empire did produce a robe of its own, and it is entirely legible. Darius's inscription at Behistun — paraphrased here, since the standard English translation is modern and in copyright — is a document about truth and the Lie: Ahuramazda gave the kingship to Darius, the provinces became rebellious because the Lie had made them so, Darius is the man who told no lie and did no wrong, and future kings are warned to punish deceivers. That is an Iranian robe, in Iranian vocabulary, resting on an Iranian god, and it was not a private object: it was cut into a cliff in three languages, and a copy in Aramaic on papyrus turned up nine hundred miles away in a Jewish garrison community at Elephantine in Egypt. The King's version of himself travelled.

But look at what it travelled *as*. It travelled as a report — an account of an accession and a war, distributed to officials and garrisons across the empire in the chancery language. What it did not do is replace anything. There is no Persian programme to make Babylonians worship Ahuramazda, no attempt to close the Esagila, no missionary apparatus in Egypt or Judah or Ionia. On the contrary. The crown paid.

That last point is documentary and it is the load-bearing fact of this module. The Jerusalem rescripts examined in the previous module provide sacrificial animals, wheat, salt, wine and oil out of royal revenue for a foreign god's cult, and exempt that god's personnel from tax. The Egyptian temple subsidies cut by Cambyses were restored under Darius. And in the King's own heartland, the Persepolis Fortification texts record the royal storehouses issuing commodities for the cults of Iranian and Elamite deities alike — Ahuramazda among them, but Elamite gods too, drawn on the same accounts by the same officials, a point developed at length by Wouter Henkelman. The crown was not running one religion. It was running a disbursement schedule.

So the robe in this empire is not reversed. It is *outsourced*. The conqueror inherited a world in which every province already had a functioning apparatus for making obedience feel like piety, complete with buildings, personnel, calendars, festivals and a literature, all of it maintained by the population itself at its own expense. Building a rival would have cost enormous sums and taken generations. Subscribing cost a schedule of disbursements and an exemption from a tax not yet collected.

And the thing subscribed to did work no Persian robe could have done, for a reason that is the heart of this module.

## The machine that turns defeat into evidence

Consider what a Judaean farmer in the middle of the sixth century had to explain.

The kingdom was gone. The temple had been destroyed. The royal house had been carried off. A large part of the population was on the canals of Babylonia. On any straightforward reading these facts constituted a decisive refutation of the claim that the god of this people was the god of the whole world and this people his elect, because the ordinary ancient inference from a defeat was that the winner's god was stronger.

The tradition did not draw that inference. It drew the opposite one, and it drew it with the full weight of a precedent structure already in place. In Jeremiah the LORD says: *Behold, I will send and take all the families of the north, saith the LORD, and Nebuchadrezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and will bring them against this land.* The most powerful king in the world, who had come for the temple's silver and the Levant's tribute and the flank against Egypt, appears in this account as a hired hand. He is not an agent with interests. He is an instrument, and the cause of the catastrophe lies entirely on the Judaean side of the ledger: the people did not keep the covenant, and this is what happens.

The precedent structure the user of this framework will recognise is the whole opening movement of the tradition. The Flood: humanity was wicked, the world was drowned, one righteous household survived. Babel: men were presumptuous, the tongues were confounded. Sodom: the cities were corrupt and were destroyed. The pattern is established long before Nebuchadnezzar and it is established as history rather than as parable, which means that when the Babylonians arrive there is already a form waiting to receive them.

And then the same form receives Cyrus, with the sign reversed. The god who was angry is now merciful; the instrument is now a deliverer; and the specification of the instrument is startlingly explicit in Isaiah 45, where the prophet has the LORD say of the Persian king, twice in two verses, *though thou hast not known me*. The text does not claim that Cyrus is a worshipper. It says he is not, and that it makes no difference, because he is being used.

This is the most efficient theological machine in the ancient record and its efficiency should be stated plainly. It is unfalsifiable in the strict sense: conquest confirms it, liberation confirms it, prosperity confirms it and famine confirms it, because every outcome is the god's response to the people's own conduct and there is no result that could count against the proposition. The believer is never in a position where the

evidence obliges him to conclude that his god is weak or absent or that the priests who interpret him are wrong.

And it is not a Judaean peculiarity. This is where the pairing at the top of the module pays. The Cyrus Cylinder runs the identical argument in Babylonian: the gods were angry, they abandoned their shrines, the anger was provoked by the last king's improper conduct of the cult, and when the anger passed the god sought out a foreign prince and installed him. Two conquered peoples, the same conquest, the same year, and each explains the event as an internal transaction between itself and its own god, in which the Persian is a functionary.

Neither priesthood was lying. That is the point the framework insists on and it must be held here. A built thing that took is more genuine than a lie, and both of these traditions were the authentic furniture of the world for the people who lived inside them. The Judaean explanation of the exile is not a cynical manoeuvre; it is the only available way of holding together a set of convictions the holders could not abandon and a set of facts they could not deny, and men died for it. What is being described is not deceit. It is what a doctrine does when it is placed under load.

## What the arrangement cost, and who could see it

The claim to test is that extraction under this arrangement was not experienced as extraction.

The mechanism is clear enough. The Judaean smallholder of the Persian period paid into a temple system — tithes, offerings, the animals for the sacrifices, whatever the precise schedule was at a given date, and the schedule changed. He paid it to men who held their positions by descent within a covenant that was, in the account he had been given, the oldest and most important fact about the world. The recipients were not foreigners and were not the King's men in any way visible from a field outside Jerusalem. No Persian soldier came to collect. And the doctrine under which he paid told him that the payment was owed to the god who made the world, that his own line's standing depended on it, and that failure to pay was the very thing that had brought the Babylonians the last time.

That is a cheap collection system. It is the cheapest one there is, because the enforcement is internal and the taxpayer audits himself.

But the evidence does not support the stronger claim that nobody noticed the weight, and the framework is better served by the accurate version. Two passages in the same corpus prove it.

The first is the fifth chapter of Nehemiah, which records an outcry in Judah, and records it in the words of the people. Some said they had mortgaged their lands,

vineyards and houses to buy corn. And then: *There were also that said, We have borrowed money for the king's tribute, and that upon our lands and vineyards.* And then the consequence: *and, lo, we bring into bondage our sons and our daughters to be servants, and some of our daughters are brought unto bondage already: neither is it in our power to redeem them; for other men have our lands and vineyards.*

Read that carefully, because it is the single most valuable passage in this module. The Persian tribute is named. It is named by the people paying it, as the reason they are borrowing, and the borrowing is destroying them. The imperial layer is not invisible.

And now watch what happens to the grievance. Nehemiah, a Jew who is the King's appointed governor and the King's former cupbearer, hears it, becomes angry — and turns the entire remedy onto the Jewish nobles and rulers who are charging usury. He convenes an assembly, obliges them to restore the lands and vineyards, takes an oath of the priests, and invokes the fear of God and the reproach of the surrounding peoples. The tribute that the people had just named as the cause is not addressed at all, because it is not addressable. It is a fact of nature, like the weather.

The second passage is the prophet Malachi's charge that the people are robbing God in tithes and offerings, which is the complaint of a priesthood being defaulted on. A collection system that has to be preached at is not collecting smoothly.

So the accurate formulation is narrower and more useful than the flat one. **The robe did not prevent the extraction from hurting. It prevented the hurt from becoming a claim against the extractor.** The injury was felt, named and complained of; what the doctrine determined was where the bill was sent — to the local rich, to the community's own failure to keep the law, and ultimately to the sufferers themselves. The imperial layer above it was described accurately and then walked around.

That is a better test of a robe's thickness than asking whether subjects report suffering. They always report suffering. The question is where they send the bill.

## Why we have this one

The last thing to establish is why this argument can be made about Judah in such detail and only sketched everywhere else.

It is not that only the Judaeans produced a robe. Babylon produced one and a copy survives, buried under a temple floor, because Rassam happened to dig there. Egypt produced one and fragments survive on Udjahorresnet's statue and in a hostile Ptolemaic papyrus. Persia produced one and it is on a cliff face a hundred metres up. Every people in the empire had a version of the arrangement and told itself a story about it; almost all of those stories were transmitted orally, or written on leather, or carved on things that were later quarried for building stone.

What is unique about the Judaean case is not that it was written but that it was *canonised* — fixed as a closed and authoritative text, copied continuously, translated repeatedly, and carried forward for two and a half thousand years by communities for whom it was scripture rather than history. Something like the final shaping of much of this literature is generally, though not universally, placed in exactly the Persian period this study is about; whether the imperial administration had any hand in authorising it is a separate and much-contested question, argued at length since Peter Frei proposed a formal Persian "imperial authorisation" of the Torah and criticised heavily since, and this study takes no position on it.

The consequence for the record is severe and it is worth stating in general terms, because it applies far beyond this case. A robe that gets canonised does not merely survive; it goes on working. For two and a half millennia this particular robe has been read in Europe and beyond as a source about Cyrus rather than as the self-description of a subject priesthood, and it is the principal reason that the founder of the Achaemenid empire enjoys, alone among ancient conquerors, something close to a saint's reputation in the Western tradition. He is the only foreign king in the Hebrew Bible called messiah. That is an extraordinary asset and Cyrus did not buy it; he was awarded it, posthumously, by the beneficiaries of a decision he made for fiscal and military reasons, and it has been compounding ever since.

## Reading the robe against the framework

Four contributions, and a caution.

**The robe can be outsourced, and where it can be, it will be.** The colonial studies in this collection found the robe reversed — cut for the metropole, because the conquered's belief was not needed and could not be had. This case adds a third possibility that the framework should carry forward: where a conqueror inherits provinces that already possess functioning cults with buildings, clergy, calendars and a literature, he neither writes a robe for them nor does without one. He subsidises theirs. **The diagnostic is whether the crown pays the local clergy**, and the Achaemenid crown paid — animals and oil for Jerusalem, restored subsidies in Egypt, storehouse rations for Elamite gods drawn on the same accounts as for Ahuramazda. The instrument is the same exemption-and-subsidy device identified in the settlement, applied to belief: nothing is built, nothing is conveyed, and a machine that already runs at the population's own expense is redirected to run in the King's name.

**A theodicy of divine punishment is worth more to a conqueror than any robe he could commission.** This is the module's central finding and it generalises well beyond Persia. *An order whose doctrine explains catastrophe as its own god's anger at its*

*own people is the cheapest order in the world to conquer and the cheapest to hold, because every application of force against it is converted, by its own interpreters, into evidence for the doctrine rather than against the conqueror.* The conqueror is removed from the causal account. He becomes weather, or a rod, or an instrument that has not known the god who wields it. A grievance requires an agent, and this theology has assigned agency elsewhere.

This yields a prediction sharp enough to test in the later modules and it is the one flagged at the outset of this collaboration: peoples holding such a doctrine should revolt least against foreign rule as such, and most violently against interference with the cult itself — because the cult is the mechanism that makes the foreign rule bearable, and an attack on it is the one imperial act the doctrine cannot absorb. Judah under Persia, Ptolemy, Pompey and Augustus is quiet. Judah under Antiochus IV, who touched the terms of the cult rather than the rate of the tax, is not.

**Thickness is measured by where the bill is sent, not by whether the injury is felt.** Nehemiah 5 is the correction the framework needs, and it is a friendly one. The Judaeans of the Persian period knew perfectly well that the king's tribute was crushing them and said so. What the robe determined was that the remedy sought was internal — an assembly, an oath before the priests, the release of pledged land by Jewish creditors — and that the imperial layer, having been correctly identified, was then stepped around as though it were a fact of geography. **A robe does not work by concealing the extraction; it works by misdirecting the remedy.** Any measurement of belief in this collection that relies on whether subjects complain will read every thick robe as thin.

**And a rule about the archive.** A robe's survival is a function of canonisation, not of the order's durability or of the doctrine's accuracy, and a canonised robe goes on generating favourable evidence about a vanished arrangement for as long as it is read. The Persian empire's reputation for tolerance is compounding interest on a text its beneficiaries wrote and their descendants preserved. This is the general form of the correction that opened this collaboration, and it should be applied to every case in the corpus: before asking whether an order's self-description is true, ask which of its subjects had a scriptorium.

**The caution, which the framework insists on and which this module will not soften.** Naming a robe is not debunking it. The Judaean explanation of the exile was not a manoeuvre and the men who held it were not dupes; it was the honest work of people holding facts and convictions that could not both be surrendered, and it produced a literature of extraordinary moral seriousness that has outlived every institution discussed in this study. The Babylonian priest who wrote that Marduk had

searched the lands was doing the same work in a different idiom and was equally in earnest. What is being measured here is not sincerity, which was total on all sides, but cost — and the finding is that a sincere doctrine of divine punishment is the cheapest thing a conqueror can find already standing on the ground he takes.

## A note on sources.

Quoted exactly, from public-domain sources: the Cyrus Cylinder, in Robert William Rogers's translation published in *Cuneiform Parallels to the Old Testament* (1912); and, from the Authorised Version, Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1 and 45:4, Jeremiah 25:9, and Nehemiah 5:4 and 5:5. Rogers's rendering is a century old and differs in places from the current scholarly editions of the Akkadian, which are in copyright; where the modern readings differ they do not affect the structure of the passage quoted, but a reader working closely on the text should use a current edition. The lacunae in the quoted Cylinder passage are in the original.

Paraphrased and not quoted: the Behistun inscription, because Roland Kent's standard English translation of 1950 is in copyright; Malachi's charge concerning tithes and offerings, given in summary; and the Persepolis Fortification material on cult disbursements, which is published in modern editions.

Paraphrased from modern scholarship, briefly and with credit: Wouter Henkelman on the crown's provision for Elamite and Iranian cults in the Persepolis texts; the long argument over Peter Frei's thesis of a Persian imperial authorisation of the Torah, which was collected and largely criticised in the volume *Persia and Torah* edited by James Watts and is not relied on here; and the general scholarly placement of much of the final shaping of the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic history in the Persian period, which is widely but not universally held and is stated as such.

Dates and disputed matters. The Cylinder is dated shortly after the entry into Babylon in October 539 and was recovered in 1879. The Isaiah passages belong to the anonymous prophetic material of chapters 40 to 55, placed by the great majority of scholars in the exilic or early post-exilic period on the grounds, among others, that Cyrus is named in them; the traditional single-author view of Isaiah is a minority position and is noted here rather than argued. Nehemiah's governorship is dated by the book itself to the twentieth to the thirty-second years of an Artaxerxes; the identification of the king carries the same uncertainty flagged in the previous module. No figure is given for the rate of the tithe or the size of the Persian assessment on Judah, because neither is recoverable with any precision, and the schedules in the biblical text are prescriptive rather than administrative records.

MODULE 4

# The Speech of Ashdod

*Module 4 · formation — an empire that formed nobody outside its own nation, and paid the conquered's own teachers to go on forming their children in the old way*

## What is being measured

Formation, in this framework, is not schooling and not propaganda. It is the question of who installs a child's picture of the world before the child is capable of screening it: who his natural leaders are, whose word is to be taken without checking, what counts as obvious, what is unthinkable, and what a good life looks like. It is the fifth of the levers set out in *The Exploit* and it is the deepest, because all the other levers are installed most durably when they are installed early, in a person who could not yet refuse them, and then buried under decades of a life built on top.

Two consequences follow, and this module turns on both.

The first is that formation determines who can be trusted without verification, and therefore determines the shape of a hierarchy's cheapness. A person who has been formed to see a particular class of men as his natural leaders will obey them at almost no cost to anybody. A person who has not been so formed can still be made to obey, but only by paying for it, in soldiers or in money.

The second is the one the Kenya study in this collection established and named, and it is the axiom this module has to work from: **there is no unformed person.** To be unformed is to be feral. A field of formation that a conqueror declines to occupy does not stay empty; the formation that was already running simply holds it. As that study put it, a withheld formation is not an absent formation but an outsourced one — and the colony that withheld its own belief from the Kikuyu, because forming them would have meant admitting them, found sixty years later that the field it had vacated had been filled by a formation it had neither built nor could enter, and closed four hundred independent schools and proscribed the independent churches in a single motion when the Emergency came.

That is one way for a conqueror to stand on this question. Persia stands somewhere else, and the difference is the subject of this module.

## Three things alone

Begin with what the Persians did to their own children, because it establishes the ceiling on everything else.

Herodotus, in George Rawlinson's translation: *Their sons are carefully instructed from their fifth to their twentieth year, in three things alone,— to ride, to draw the bow, and to speak the truth.*

Fifteen years, three subjects. Horsemanship, archery, and not lying. It is an aristocratic warrior formation, transmitted in households and on horseback, and it is entirely consistent with the doctrine of truth against the Lie that Darius cut into the cliff at Behistun. It is also, as a formation, extraordinarily narrow, and — this is the point — it contains no mechanism whatever for including anybody who is not already Persian. There is no curriculum, no institution, no admission, no examination and no graduation. You are formed into it by being born into a Persian household and raised in one.

The documentary counterpart is more striking still. Among the tens of thousands of Elamite tablets from the Persepolis fortification, two texts dated to the twenty-third regnal year of Darius — 499 — record commodity issues to Persian boys who are copying texts: grain to twenty-nine of them and wine to sixteen. That is, in the surviving administrative record of the empire's own heartland, the whole of its formal educational establishment. Twenty-nine boys, on rations, learning to write, in an empire of somewhere between seventeen and thirty-five million people.

And the corollary is documented too. Persian nobles and senior officials were very largely illiterate; writing had no place in the standard Persian formation; and the imperial chancery was accordingly staffed by foreign scribes working in Aramaic. The ruling nation of the largest empire in the world outsourced its own literacy to the people it ruled.

Hold that beside Rome for a moment, because the comparison is not decorative. Rome had a language of instruction, a literature, a legal status that could be conferred, a ladder from provincial to citizen to senator, and by the second century a Gaul in the Senate whose great-grandson could not have imagined being anything but Roman. The Arab conquest of North Africa, over centuries, formed the conquered so completely that a millennium later the Qur'anic law and calendar were simply the way the world was — the case this collection uses to show a former conquest that fully took. Persia had none of the apparatus that either of those required, and there is no sign in two hundred and twenty years that anybody at Susa thought the absence was a problem.

## Neither imposed, nor withheld

So the Achaemenid position on formation is not the colonial one. The colony in Kenya *withheld*: it possessed a formation, it knew perfectly well that installing it would have produced belief, and it capped the schooling below the level at which belief takes, because forming the Kikuyu into the story of trusteeship would have meant admitting them into it and paying the bill. That is a deliberate refusal, taken with the alternative in view.

Persia did not refuse. There was nothing to refuse with. A household warrior formation in an unwritten aristocratic idiom cannot be exported to Babylonia even in principle, and no Persian appears to have wanted to try.

But the empire did not merely leave the field. It did something more interesting and considerably cheaper, and the evidence for it is unusually good because one of the peoples concerned kept the paperwork.

## The charter

The rescript attributed to Artaxerxes in the seventh chapter of Ezra, whose fiscal provisions the previous module examined, ends with a set of clauses that are not fiscal at all. In the Authorised Version:

*And thou, Ezra, after the wisdom of thy God, that is in thine hand, set magistrates and judges, which may judge all the people that are beyond the river, all such as know the laws of thy God; and teach ye them that know them not. And whosoever will not do the law of thy God, and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily upon him, whether it be unto death, or to banishment, or to confiscation of goods, or to imprisonment.*

Read what is being conveyed. A priest and scribe is authorised by the King of Persia to appoint a judiciary over a subject population, to apply that population's own religious law, to *teach* that law to those of them who do not know it, and to punish non-compliance with death, exile, confiscation or prison. The two laws are set side by side in a single clause — the law of thy God, and the law of the king — as though they were one instrument, which for this purpose they are.

That is not tolerance and it is not indifference. It is a formation programme, backed by the imperial floor of force, run by local personnel, at the crown's expense, over a population that is to be taught its own tradition by men the King has commissioned.

The programme in operation is recorded in the eighth chapter of Nehemiah: Ezra reads the book of the law before the assembled people from morning until midday, before men and women and all that could hear with understanding, with Levites moving among them, and *So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave*

*the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.* That is a mass formation event — a text read aloud with interpreters supplying the meaning to a population that could not read it and, on the account the chapter itself gives, wept when it heard what was in it.

And the programme policing its own boundary is recorded five chapters later, and it is the sharpest thing in this module. Nehemiah — a Jew, a former royal cupbearer, and the King's appointed governor of the province — comes upon families where the transmission has failed:

*In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab: And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people. And I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves.*

The anxiety is precisely and explicitly about children and language. Not about doctrine held by adults, not about tribute, not about the temple's revenues — about what small children could and could not say, which is the exact site at which a formation either transmits or dies. And the remedy is physical: he beats them and tears out their hair and puts them under oath about whom their children may marry.

Now hold the two facts about this man together, because the whole module is in the juxtaposition. He holds his commission from the King of Persia; his salary, his authority and his safe-conduct come from Susa; the wall he built was built with the King's letters to the keeper of the royal forest. And what he is doing with that commission, in the province, is making Jewish children Jewish.

## The garrison that kept its god

One more case, because it shows the arrangement from an unexpected angle.

On the island of Elephantine at the first cataract of the Nile there was, through the Persian period, a garrison of Judaean soldiers in the King's service, who had their own temple to Yahu and their own priests and their own festivals, and who wrote in Aramaic on papyrus which the Egyptian dryness preserved. Their religious practice was not the practice of Jerusalem — their documents name other divine beings alongside their god in ways the Jerusalem priesthood would have regarded as irregular — and nobody in the imperial administration appears to have cared.

When their temple was destroyed in 410 they petitioned for permission to rebuild it, and the petition is the instructive part: they wrote to the Persian-appointed governor of Judah, and they also wrote to the sons of Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, and they

had earlier written to the high priest at Jerusalem and received no reply. The eventual authorisation, in a memorandum whose modern translations are in copyright and which is therefore paraphrased here, permitted the rebuilding of the altar house and the offering of meal-offering and incense; burnt offerings of animals are conspicuously absent from it, and the reason for the omission is debated.

Two findings. First, a community formed entirely in its own tradition served the empire under arms for generations at the far end of the world, and the empire neither reformed it nor minded that it existed. Second, and more useful: the community could not rebuild its own temple without a permit, and the permit specified what might be offered on the altar. The formation is untouched; the licence is the leash. The empire does not tell you what to believe. It tells you what you may burn.

## What was never built

Set out the negative side of the ledger plainly, because it is the finding.

In roughly two hundred and twenty years the Achaemenid empire produced no imperial language of instruction — Aramaic was a chancery instrument inherited from the Assyrians and used by clerks, not a vehicle by which anybody was formed into anything Persian. It produced no citizenship and no legal status that a subject could acquire. It produced no schools outside the twenty-nine boys at Persepolis and whatever similar arrangements have not survived. It established no cult that non-Iranians were formed into; the Persepolis storehouses paid out for Elamite gods and for Ahuramazda from the same accounts, and there is no missionary apparatus anywhere in the record. And it opened no path by which a Babylonian, an Egyptian, a Lydian or a Judaean could become a Persian. He could become rich, powerful, trusted, a satrap's officer, a royal physician, a governor — Udjahorresnet was all but the last of these — and he remained, in every document, an Egyptian.

The one partial exception is worth stating because it proves the mechanism rather than complicating it. In parts of Anatolia, where Persian families actually settled in numbers, held estates and intermarried, Iranian names, Iranian cults and Persian manners appear among local elites, and some dynasts adopted them thoroughly. Formation ran there because Persians were physically present in households over generations — which is the only way this particular formation could ever have run, since it had no institutional form.

## Reading formation against the framework

Three contributions, one of which the collection needs, and a prediction.

**There is a third position on this axis, and it should be named: the chartered formation.** The corpus has had two. A conqueror may *impose* his formation, at great cost and over generations, and eventually grow a population that believes in his order because it was raised in it — Rome, or the Arab conquest of North Africa. Or he may *withhold* it, as the colonial cases do, because forming the ruled would mean admitting them, and then discover that the field he vacated has been filled by something he cannot enter. Persia demonstrates a third. **The conqueror may leave the incumbent formation in place, pay its custodians, and lend it his own coercive power against its internal defaulters.** Ezra's commission is the instrument in its purest form: royal authority to appoint judges, to teach the law to those who do not know it, and to punish refusal with death or exile.

**Which yields the correction the Kenya finding needs.** That study established that a withheld formation is not absent but outsourced. This case adds the variable that decides what the outsourced formation becomes. *An outsourced formation can be an enemy or an asset, and the difference is whether the conqueror pays its custodians.* Kenya paid nothing, entered nothing, and in 1952 had to close four hundred schools it had never built and could not use. Persia paid — animals and oil, an exemption from toll, tribute and custom, and a judiciary commission — and the same structural arrangement produced a subject literature that calls the King the anointed of God. Identical position on the formation axis; opposite outcomes; and the variable is the payroll.

**But the charter has a price, and it is the whole of this empire's eventual problem.** Because no one below the purchased elite is ever formed to regard the King as anything, **the empire's real constituency is exactly as wide as its payroll.** A chartered formation buys the elite and forfeits the people. This is the underlying reason for the finding in the first module — that the Achaemenid apex was switchable almost everywhere, and that countries changed hands without battles. It was not that subject peoples were faithless. It is that no mechanism for producing faith had ever existed, and none had been attempted. The Judaean farmer was formed to know exactly who his natural leaders were, and they were the priests and the elders of his own people, and the King of Persia did not appear in that picture at any point except as an instrument in somebody else's hand.

And note the contrast that makes this precise rather than rhetorical. Kenya, having *withheld* formation for sixty years, could nevertheless find in 1952 a fragment of the ruled — Christian, propertied, mission-schooled, admitted through a ceiling raised just high enough — who fought for the colonial order because they had something inside it that was their own to lose. Persia in 330 had no such fragment anywhere outside Iran,

and structurally could not have had one, because it had never raised the ceiling anywhere at all. Withholding leaves a door ajar by accident. Chartering does not leave a door.

**So the rule, stated for the corpus: the cheapness of a chartered order and its brittleness under a rival bidder are not two properties to be traded off against each other but a single property described twice.** What makes such an order cheap is that no belief in the ruler has to be manufactured or maintained anywhere. What makes it brittle is that no belief in the ruler exists to be drawn upon when somebody else arrives offering the same charter on the same terms. The saving and the exposure are the same line in the accounts.

**The prediction, to be tested in the modules on change and collapse:** an order held by charter does not fall to a rising from below, because nothing below the joint was ever attached to it and there is nothing there to rise. It changes hands at the top, quickly, and the change is nearly invisible from underneath, because from underneath almost nothing changes — the priest is the same priest, the tithe is the same tithe, the calendar is the same calendar, and only the name in the formula is different. That is the shape to look for in 330, and it is the shape the Judaean record of the transition to Ptolemy and then to Seleucid and then to Rome will also show.

**And a note on the recursion, which this case states more sharply than any other in the corpus.** The framework holds that a conqueror never meets an aboriginal order but only an earlier build that took. Here the point goes further. The formation that held the field in Judah was not merely a former build left standing; it was, in significant part, *consolidated and reinstalled during and after the exile*, with Persian money, under Persian licence, and enforced by a Persian-appointed governor with the King's power of death and banishment behind him. A conqueror did not simply tolerate the conquered's formation. He commissioned its restoration and paid for the teaching. That the origin of a thing was built does not make the belief a lie; it makes it a thing that was built and then became real — and here we can watch some of the building being invoiced.

## A note on sources.

Quoted exactly, from public-domain sources: Herodotus, *Histories* 1.136, on the three things Persian boys were taught, in George Rawlinson's translation; and, from the Authorised Version, Ezra 7:25–26, Nehemiah 8:8, and Nehemiah 13:23–25. The authenticity question over the Aramaic documents in Ezra, set out in the second module of this study, applies to the Ezra commission quoted here and is not repeated;

the same double reading holds, that a genuine rescript is the charter itself and a later composition is the charter as its beneficiaries understood it.

Paraphrased and not quoted: the Persepolis Fortification texts recording rations to Persian boys copying texts, published by Richard Hallock as numbers 871 and 1137 and dated to Darius's twenty-third regnal year; and the Elephantine correspondence concerning the destroyed temple of Yahu and the memorandum authorising its rebuilding, because the standard editions and translations are modern and in copyright. The reading that the authorisation permitted meal-offering and incense while omitting animal sacrifice is the usual one, and the reason for the omission — whether deference to Egyptian priestly sensibilities, alignment with Jerusalem's claim to a monopoly on sacrifice, or something else — is genuinely disputed.

Paraphrased from modern scholarship, briefly and with credit: the account of Achaemenid education, including the illiteracy of the Persian nobility and the staffing of the chancery with foreign Aramaic scribes and the continuation of Babylonian and Egyptian scribal schooling under Persian rule, follows the survey in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*; the evidence for Iranian names, cults and manners among Anatolian elites is drawn from the standard literature on Achaemenid Asia Minor. The Kenya findings quoted and built on here are from this collection's own study of that colony.

Dates and uncertainties. The Persepolis school texts are dated 499. Ezra's and Nehemiah's commissions are dated by their books to the seventh and twentieth years of an Artaxerxes, with the identification of the king and the relative order of the two men both contested; nothing in this module depends on resolving either. The Elephantine temple was destroyed in 410 and the correspondence about rebuilding follows over the next few years. No figure is offered for literacy rates anywhere in the empire, because none is recoverable; the statement that Babylonian literacy was comparatively widespread among non-Iranians is a scholarly judgement based on the range of social origins visible among attested scribes, not a measurement.

MODULE 5

# The Opening of the Gates

*Module 5 · the cost column — what compliance cost the ordinary subject, what it bought him, why walking away was not available, and where in the whole arrangement the King actually had to apply force*

## The question, asked from underneath

The previous four modules have been about the arrangement seen from above and from the middle: how the country was taken, what the elites received, what doctrine made the receiving decent, and who formed the children. This module asks the only question that matters to the great majority of the empire's seventeen to thirty-five million people, and it is a question about a ledger rather than a belief.

Why comply?

Set it out as the framework requires. A person weighs what compliance costs him against what it brings him; a cost bears on the decision only where a credible power will impose it and he believes it will fall; and both columns are read from where he stands, which for most of the empire's inhabitants was a field, a workshop or a work gang. To that has to be added the two things the framework insists are usually decisive and are usually left out of political accounts: whether he could leave, and what the people immediately around him would do to him if he refused.

The answer, worked out below, is not the one either an admirer or a detractor of this empire would want. The ordinary subject of the Achaemenid King was very rarely coerced by anybody Persian, paid a burden that was probably no heavier and possibly lighter than what he had paid before, received real goods in return, and had essentially nowhere to go. Those four facts are not in tension. Together they are the reason the whole structure ran so cheaply, and the reason it was worth almost nothing to its owners when somebody came to take it.

## What it cost in silver

Herodotus gives the assessment, province by province, and though every figure in it needs handling, the shape is usable. In A. D. Godley's translation the Babylonian province rendered *a thousand talents of silver and five hundred boys to be eunuchs*; Egypt seven hundred talents, plus the revenue from the fish of Lake Moeris, plus *an hundred and twenty thousand bushels of grain* assigned to the Persian garrison at the White

Citadel of Memphis; India three hundred and sixty talents of gold dust; and the whole, converted to a single standard, *a yearly tribute of fourteen thousand five hundred and sixty talents*.

Handle it carefully. This is a Greek writer, half a century after the assessment, working from sources he does not name, and the numbers are suspiciously tidy; some scholars regard the list as substantially a construct. But two things about it survive scepticism. The first is that a fixed schedule existed, which the Babylonian and Egyptian administrative material independently confirms. The second is the composition of the payments, which is more revealing than the totals.

Because what actually reached a village was not a talent of silver. Silver was the unit in which the province was assessed; the province was then broken down, and the man in the field paid in grain, in dates, in labour, and in a share of what he grew, to a collector who was not Persian. In Babylonia the tax on a date garden or a barley field was assessed and collected through intermediaries — temple estates, hatru officials, and by the late fifth century private firms like the Murashu house at Nippur, which advanced silver against the harvest to holders who could not otherwise meet their obligations, and took leases and pledges in return.

That last mechanism is the one to hold. A tax paid in kind out of a harvest is a proportion. A tax converted into a fixed silver sum, due on a date, in an economy where the cultivator does not hold silver, is something else: it forces him to borrow, and borrowing at the standard Babylonian rate of a fifth per year against land he cannot afford to lose is the mechanism by which smallholders become tenants. The imperial demand did not have to rise for the smallholder's position to deteriorate. It only had to be denominated in a currency he did not have.

## What it cost in children

One item in the assessment is not silver and should not be paraphrased into comfort. Babylonia rendered, on Herodotus's account, five hundred boys a year to be made eunuchs. The Colchians and their neighbours rendered, every five years, *an hundred boys and as many maidens*.

Herodotus is the source and he may be wrong about the numbers, and the practice of levying young people as tribute is independently attested in the region long before the Persians and long after. But nothing about the uncertainty softens what the item is. This is a demand made on ordinary households, not on elites; the boys did not come out of satraps' families. Whatever the figure, some quantity of children were removed annually from villages in Mesopotamia and the Caucasus, and a proportion of them

were mutilated, and this was a line in a routine fiscal schedule alongside horses and frankincense.

The tolerance thesis has no answer to this because the tolerance thesis is about temples.

## What it cost in labour, and what the labour was paid

The clearest evidence anywhere in the empire for what the state's own workforce received is the Persepolis Fortification archive, and it is unusually good because these are internal accounting documents rather than anybody's self-description.

Everyone in the state sector was on a fixed ration scale, graded by sex, age and skill, and issued monthly in grain, wine or beer, with silver appearing in the later Treasury texts. A representative document — paraphrased rather than quoted, since Richard Hallock's edition is in copyright — records a month's grain for a work group of ninety-two people at one location: sixteen men at three units each, a scatter of boys at two, one and a half and one, some three dozen women at four, others at three and two, one woman at five, and girls graded like the boys. A unit here is ten quarts, so an adult man's month was around thirty quarts of grain.

Three observations follow and each matters for the ledger.

First, the groups contain women and children in numbers, with their own entitlements. These are not gangs of expendable captives worked until they die; they are resident populations being provisioned as households, and the archive also records special payments to mothers. A state that issues a ration to a newborn's mother is a state that expects the newborn to be working for it in fifteen years.

Second, the women in that group draw more than the men, which reflects skill rather than generosity — this is very likely a textile workforce — and the general finding is that where the work was skilled, rations went by grade rather than by sex.

Third, and most importantly: these people are being *fed by the state*, in a system that counts, records and audits every issue. The status of the *kurtaš* is argued over — deportees, prisoners of war, corvée labour, dependent workers, some mixture — and the argument is not settled. What is not in doubt is that this is a command economy in labour, in which a large workforce had its subsistence determined by an official's ledger. Whether that was better or worse than being a free tenant depended entirely on the harvest.

## Whether he could leave

This is the variable that decides the module, and the answer is the one the landscape set up on its first page.

For the deportee there was no exit at all. The Judaeans on the Nippur canals, the peoples Herodotus describes as "removed" to islands in the southern sea, the workforces at Persepolis drawn from across the empire — these were populations whose location was a state decision and whose land was held against an obligation. Leaving meant abandoning the plot, which meant abandoning subsistence, and there was nowhere within the empire that was not the empire.

For the ordinary cultivator the constraint was physical before it was political. On the Babylonian alluvium and on the Iranian plateau, land produces food only because water has been led to it by works that took generations to build and require collective maintenance every year. A man's field is not portable and neither is his access to water. To leave is not to move to a better arrangement; it is to walk away from the only thing that feeds you, into country that feeds nobody. The same hydrology that made these provinces the richest ground in the world made their inhabitants the least able to leave it — and that, not any Persian instrument, is the deepest reason the cost column could be kept thin.

The exceptions prove the rule and they are instructive. The Phocaeans and the Teians, when Harpagus came, put their populations into ships and sailed away, because a maritime city's capital is its fleet and its skills, both of which travel. That option existed for perhaps a few dozen communities on a long coast and for nobody else. Inland, the classical exit was flight to ground the state could not work — the marshes of southern Mesopotamia, the mountains, the desert margin — and it was available, and it meant becoming poor and dangerous rather than merely poor.

And there was one further exit, downwards, which the record names. In Nehemiah's Judah men mortgaged fields and vineyards, and then sold their children: *we bring into bondage our sons and our daughters to be servants, and some of our daughters are brought unto bondage already: neither is it in our power to redeem them.* Debt bondage is what happens at the bottom of a ledger with no exit at the side.

Finally, movement itself was documented. Travellers on the royal roads carried sealed authorisations stating what rations they were entitled to draw at the stations — an instrument of provisioning rather than of control, but one which means that for anybody inside the state sphere, being somewhere required a document saying you were expected there.

## What he got

The honest ledger has a benefit column and it is not empty.

He got peace, over stretches longer than anything his ancestors had known. Babylonia between 539 and the revolts against Xerxes, and the Levant for most of two centuries, were not fought over. For an agricultural population the difference between a generation with an army in it and a generation without one is not a matter of degree.

He got the water kept running, which is a real service and an expensive one. Michael Jursa's work on the Babylonian economy of the long sixth century describes canals extended and date gardens laid out on former arable, an investment that begins under the Neo-Babylonian kings and pays off straight across the conquest of 539 — the Persian administration did not interrupt it.

He got roads that Herodotus describes as running through country inhabited and safe, standard weights, and a single enormous market in which the produce of his region could be sold.

He got a law, and in the cases we can see, a right of petition that sometimes worked. The Judaeans at Elephantine, having lost their temple, petitioned officials hundreds of miles away and eventually got an authorisation. Egyptians got their own law codified at royal order. Whether an ordinary villager could reach these mechanisms is another question, and the answer is usually no; but they existed, which is more than can be said of many arrangements in this collection.

The question a reader will want answered is whether the median subject was better off under Persia than under Babylon or Assyria, and the honest answer is that we mostly cannot tell. The price and wage series that would settle it exist only for Babylonia, only through temple and business archives, and they show continuity rather than rupture across 539. The rest is inference from the accounts of people who were not poor.

## Why he complied

Put the columns together for a Judaean smallholder, a Babylonian tenant, an Egyptian peasant.

The cost of compliance was a share of the crop, some days of labour on the canal, and — for a minority — a son taken. The cost of refusal was not a Persian soldier, because there was no Persian soldier within a week's march of most villages in the empire. It was the temple official, the hatru chief, the tax farmer, the village elders, and the creditor. The framework's rule holds exactly here: a cost binds where a credible power will impose it, and for the ordinary subject of this empire the credible power was

almost always local, and was almost always somebody who shared his god, his language and his ancestors.

Above that sat the doctrine examined in the third module, which told him that the payment was owed to the god who made the world and that failure to pay was what had brought disaster the last time. And around him sat his neighbours, who had all made the same calculation, and whose good opinion was the only insurance he had against a bad year.

Beneath all of it lay the fact that he could not leave.

That is a cost column in which the imperial layer barely appears — and it is worth being precise about what that means. It does not mean the burden was light. It means the burden was collected by his own people, justified by his own god, enforced by his own community, and inescapable for reasons of hydrology. The King did not need to be feared. He needed only to be at the top of a structure every layer of which was already load-bearing.

## The gates

Which leaves the one place where the King's power did touch the ordinary man directly, and Herodotus preserves it in a passage that is worth having entire. In Godley's translation:

*There is in Asia a plain surrounded by mountains, through which mountains there are five clefts... Now from the encircling mountains flows a great river called Aces. Its stream divides into five channels, and watered formerly the lands of the peoples aforesaid by passing to them severally through the five clefts; but since the beginning of the Persian rule the king has blocked the mountain clefts, and closed each passage with a gate; the water thus barred from outlet, the plain within the mountains becomes a lake... Those therefore who formerly used the water can use it no longer, and are in very evil case... So whenever no water is given to them, they come into Persia with their women, and cry and howl before the door of the king's palace, till the king commands that the river-gate which leads thither should be opened for those whose need is greatest; then, when this land has drunk its fill of water, that gate is shut, and the king bids open another for those of the rest who most require it. I have heard and know that he exacts great sums, over and above the tribute, for the opening of the gates.*

The passage must be discounted and then kept. How and Wells, in the standard commentary, judged the description essentially imaginative — the geography does not work as described — but added that the idea of the chapter is correct, since control of irrigation is a prerogative of government in that world and great sums are charged for water. That is the right handling. Herodotus has probably constructed a scene. He has

constructed it out of a real mechanism, and he has constructed it more accurately than he knew.

Because this is the cost column of the Achaemenid empire rendered as a piece of hydraulic engineering. The King does not tax the villagers. He does not garrison them, form them, convert them or police them. He owns the gate. They come to him, with their families, and ask; he opens it for whoever needs it most, which is to say for whoever will pay most; and then he shuts it again. The compliance is total and the enforcement cost is one gatekeeper.

## Reading the cost column against the framework

Four things, and a prediction.

**The coercion of a chartered empire concentrates at whatever it monopolises, and is nearly absent everywhere else.** This is the module's central finding and the gate on the river is its emblem. Because collection was chartered out to the subject's own priests, elders and creditors, the imperial floor almost never had to touch an ordinary person; where the crown did apply direct pressure it applied it at chokepoints it alone controlled — water, the road, the permit to rebuild an altar, the licence to hold an office. **A ruler who holds a monopoly at a chokepoint does not need a cost column at the base at all**, because he is not obliging anyone to do anything; he is withholding something they cannot obtain elsewhere, and letting them come to him. This should be added to the corpus alongside the settlement instruments, because it is the same logic as forbearance and exemption seen from the other side: those grant relief from a demand, this withholds a supply.

**Exit is the master variable, and here it was near zero for structural rather than political reasons.** *Where the subject's subsistence depends on immobile, collectively maintained capital, exit is not a costly option but an unavailable one, and the ruler can therefore run a very thin cost column and still hold everybody.* The landscape of this study opened on water that had to be fetched from under the ground and maintained for ever; this module closes the loop. The same hydrology that made the empire's core provinces the richest ground on earth made their populations the least able to walk away from them. A conqueror who takes such country has bought, along with the harvest, a population that cannot emigrate.

**Compliance here was inherited rather than purchased or compelled, and the framework should mark the distinction.** The ordinary subject was not bought — he received no exemption and no subsidy; those went to his priests. He was not compelled — no Persian force stood over him. He complied because the arrangement he was born into required it, because the men enforcing it were his own, and because he had been

formed to regard the requirement as a duty to a god rather than a payment to a state. **An inherited compliance is the cheapest of the three and the one that transfers most completely to a new owner**, because nothing in it is attached to the person at the top.

**And the ledger has to be kept honest in both directions.** There was real benefit — a long peace, canals maintained, roads that were safe, a market, and in some cases a workable petition. There was also a fiscal item consisting of five hundred boys a year to be made eunuchs. Both belong in the same column and the study will not average them into a verdict. Legibility is not pardon, and it is also not indictment; what can be said is that the burden fell where the framework predicts it falls in an order held by charter — heavily and invisibly on people whose complaints reached nobody, through collectors who were their neighbours.

**The prediction, for the modules on extraction and collapse.** An empire whose cost column at the base is this thin has no instrument for raising it. It has never built the apparatus — no imperial police, no imperial assessors in the villages, no formation that would make a higher demand feel legitimate — and so when it needs more money it cannot press harder on the population; it can only press harder on the same joints it already holds, which means squeezing satraps, farming taxes out to intermediaries, and selling offices. Every one of those transfers a little more of the real relationship with the subject to somebody who is not the King. That is the process to watch in the fourth century, and it is the mechanism by which an empire can be simultaneously rich, quiet, and worth nothing to defend.

## A note on sources.

Quoted exactly, from a public-domain source: Herodotus, *Histories* 3.91, 3.92, 3.95, 3.97 and 3.117, in A. D. Godley's Loeb translation of 1921; and Nehemiah 5:5 in the Authorised Version. The tribute list is used for its structure and its composition rather than for the reliability of its totals; a substantial body of scholarship regards it as at least partly a construct, and the round figures invite that suspicion. The account of the river Aces is judged largely imaginative in its geography by How and Wells in their commentary, who nonetheless affirm the mechanism it describes; that judgement is given in the text rather than buried here, because the passage is doing load-bearing work.

Paraphrased and not quoted: the Persepolis Fortification ration texts, because Richard Hallock's edition of 1969 and the subsequent publications are in copyright. The ration figures given — an adult male month of roughly three units of ten quarts of grain, with women, boys and girls graded, and with skilled women drawing at or above

male rates — are representative rather than universal, and are drawn from published examples; readers should consult the edition for the full range, which is wide. The status of the *kurtaš* is genuinely disputed across the literature, between readings that see them as deported dependent labour, as corvée, and as a paid state workforce, and this module does not choose between them.

Paraphrased from modern scholarship, briefly and with credit: Michael Jursa on the Babylonian agrarian expansion of the long sixth century and its continuity across 539; Matthew Stolper on the Murashu firm and the mechanics of advancing silver against the harvest; and the standard treatments of Babylonian interest rates, conventionally around twenty per cent per annum on silver loans, which varied by period, security and lender.

Figures and their uncertainties. Herodotus's grand total of 14,560 talents is his own arithmetic on his own list and is not independently corroborated. No population figure is offered for the *kurtaš* workforce, for the number of children actually rendered as tribute in any year, or for the proportion of Babylonian smallholders who lost their land to debt across the period, because none of the three is recoverable. The claim that the median subject's burden was comparable before and after 539 rests on Babylonian temple and business archives and does not extend to provinces where no such archives survive, which is most of them.

MODULE 6

# Poured into Earthen Vessels

*Module 6 · extraction — how the empire measured what it took, who kept a share on the way up, what happened to the metal when it arrived, and the difference between a tax schedule and a procession of gifts*

## The machine, not the burden

The previous module asked what compliance cost the ordinary subject. This one asks a different question, and the difference matters: not what was taken, but how the taking was organised — measured, graded, collected, transmitted, converted, and finally disposed of.

The answer has four parts and the last of them is the strangest thing in this study. Persia measured its provinces with unusual precision; it let the men who collected keep a stated share on the way up; it turned the proceeds into metal; and then it stopped. The silver did not circulate. It was melted, poured into jars and left, and two centuries later a Macedonian walked into two rooms and found the accumulated surplus of the richest provinces on earth sitting in them, untouched.

Everything else in this module is an attempt to explain why an empire would do that, and what it cost them when somebody came for it.

## The measurement

The Persians did not invent tribute. What Darius did, some time around 519, was to make it a schedule, and the schedule required a survey.

The reform is described in the modern literature — Muhammad Dandamaev and Vladimir Lukonin set it out at length, and it is paraphrased here rather than quoted — as a systematic assessment: land measured, classified by crop and by yield, and the silver liability of each province fixed from the resulting registers. Babylonian cadastral documents survive that record fruit trees, crops and the extent of arable, the earliest of them dated to Darius's third year, which fits the reform exactly.

That is a bureaucratic act of a high order and it is the real content of the insult recorded in the previous module. The Persians called Darius a huckster not because he took more but because he *counted*. A gift is an event between two persons; an assessment derived from a survey of trees and yields is a relationship between an office and a piece of ground, and it does not care who is standing on it. The complaint of the

Persian nobility about the man who introduced it is the complaint of every aristocracy that has watched a treasury replace a favour.

And it should be said plainly that measurement is the precondition of everything else in this module. You cannot fix a share for the collector, or predict a revenue, or know that a province is in arrears, without first knowing what the province contains.

## The collector's share

Now the part of the schedule that is usually read past. Herodotus, listing the fourth province, in Godley's translation:

*The fourth province was Cilicia. This rendered three hundred and sixty white horses, one for each day in the year, and five hundred talents of silver. An hundred and forty of these were expended on the horsemen who were the guard of Cilicia; the three hundred and sixty that remained were paid to Darius.*

Twenty-eight per cent, retained at source, stated on the face of the assessment, to pay for the province's own cavalry.

This is the shape of the whole system and it should be held clearly. A satrap is not a salaried official disbursing a budget sent from the centre. He is closer to a franchise holder. He collects the assessment, meets his establishment out of it — his garrison, his court, his officials, his roads — and remits the balance. The King's revenue is a residual.

Three consequences follow, and they run through the rest of the empire's life.

The first is that the man in the province has an interest in the province's prosperity, because his own establishment comes out of the same pot. This is a genuine efficiency and it is one reason the Achaemenid provinces were not systematically stripped.

The second is that the centre cannot easily audit the deduction. It knows the remittance; it does not know, from Susa, ninety days away, what the local establishment truly cost.

The third is the one that matters for the collapse. As the crown's need rises, the only lever available is to raise the assessment — and raising the assessment raises the franchisee's absolute retention along with it. Every increase in imperial demand makes the satrap richer in the same motion. An arrangement that funds its provincial governors as a percentage of what they collect will, under fiscal pressure, strengthen exactly the men it most needs to weaken.

## Coin, and where there wasn't any

A word on money, because it is easy to picture this empire as more monetised than it was.

The crown issued gold darics and silver sigloi, and the gold coinage was in principle a royal prerogative. But coined money mattered chiefly in the west — in Anatolia and towards the Aegean, where there were Greek cities that used coin, and where the empire had to pay mercenaries who insisted on it. In Babylonia and eastward, silver circulated by weight, in shekels of metal cut and weighed at each transaction, and the Persepolis administration paid in commodities: grain, wine, beer, and only later, in the Treasury texts, silver.

So the empire's fiscal system had two halves that did not speak the same language. In the west, a monetised zone where the crown's coin was a payment instrument and where a mercenary could be hired for it. In the east and centre, a command economy of measured commodities and weighed metal, where the crown's silver was a store rather than a currency.

That distinction sets up what follows.

## Poured into earthen vessels

Herodotus, having finished the assessment list, describes what happened at the other end. In Godley's translation:

*The tribute is stored by the king in this fashion: he melts it down and pours it into earthen vessels; when the vessel is full he breaks the earthenware away, and when he needs money cuts off as much as will serve his purpose.*

Read that as a description of an economy and it is astonishing. Metal arrives from twenty provinces. It is melted. It is cast into jars, the jars are broken away, and the resulting blocks are stacked. When money is required, a piece is cut off.

This is extraction that terminates. The silver does not re-enter circulation as payment to soldiers, or as investment, or as loans, or as coin. It is demonetised — converted from a medium into a mass — and stored. In an economy that is only partly monetised to begin with, and where much of the tax is collected in kind anyway, this is not as economically catastrophic as it would be in a coin economy; but the direction is unmistakable. Year after year, the surplus of the empire flows inward and stops.

The description may itself be a Greek's simplification. What is not in doubt is the outcome, because the outcome was inventoried by the people who took it.

## What the pile was

In late 331, after Gaugamela, the satrap of Susiana surrendered Susa to Alexander without a fight, along with its treasury. Diodorus — paraphrased here, since the Loeb translation of that book is in copyright — records more than forty thousand talents of

gold and silver in bullion, and he gives the reason for its existence in a clause that is the best single sentence written about this empire's finances by anybody in antiquity: the kings had accumulated it unused, over a long period, as a protection against the reverses of fortune. To that Diodorus adds nine thousand talents in coined gold bearing the king's effigy.

At Persepolis a few months later the figure is larger and the sources disagree about how much larger: Diodorus gives a hundred and twenty thousand talents, Strabo a hundred and eighty thousand, Justin a hundred and ninety thousand. Any of these is an enormous quantity of metal — the lowest figure is on the order of three thousand tons — and all of them should be treated as orders of magnitude rather than counts. Diodorus says it was the accumulated revenue from Cyrus down to that time, and that moving it required a crowd of mules and three thousand camels sent for from Babylon, Mesopotamia and Susa.

Two centuries of the surplus of Babylonia, Egypt, Lydia, the Levant and India, sitting in store rooms on a terrace in Fars, doing nothing.

## The manifest

What the extraction *was* spent on, when it was spent, is set out by the King himself, in a foundation text from Susa known as DSf, which is one of the most revealing documents in the whole imperial corpus. The standard English translation is Roland Kent's and is in copyright, so its content is given here in summary.

Darius describes building his palace at Susa. The earth was dug down to rock, rubble was packed in to a stated depth, and the sun-dried brick was moulded — and all of that work, he says, was done by the Babylonian people. The cedar timber came from a mountain named Lebanon; Assyrians brought it to Babylon and Carians and Ionians brought it from Babylon to Susa. Other timber came from Gandara and Carmania. The gold came from Sardis and from Bactria. Lapis lazuli and carnelian came from Sogdiana, turquoise from Chorasmia, silver and ebony from Egypt, wall ornament from Ionia, ivory from Kush and from Sind and from Arachosia. The stone columns came from a named village in Elam. And then the workmen, listed by nation: the stonecutters were Ionians and Lydians; the goldsmiths were Medes and Egyptians; and the brickwork and earthmoving were Babylonian.

That is an extraction manifest published as a hymn. Every clause names a province and states what was taken out of it, in materials and in men, and the whole is offered as evidence of the King's greatness rather than of the provinces' contribution. It is also, read structurally, the settlement of the second module rendered as a building: each

people appears in the list as the thing it is good for, and none of them appears as a participant in anything.

## The gift that was a tax

Which brings us to the last document, which is not written at all.

On the staircases of the Apadana at Persepolis, twenty-three delegations of subject peoples proceed toward the enthroned King, each in its own national dress, separated by cypress trees, carrying vessels of gold and silver, textiles, weapons, jewellery and animals from their own countries — horses from Armenia, a two-humped camel from the Parthians, ivory from Nubia, a lioness and her cubs from Elam. And at the head of each delegation a Persian or Median usher takes the leader by the hand and leads him forward.

There are no chains. There are no bound captives, no severed heads, no impalings, none of the vocabulary of Assyrian royal art that the Assyria study in this collection examined at length. The delegates are not prisoners and are not shown as defeated. They are guests, arriving with gifts, apparently at the New Year, and a courtier holds each leader's hand.

Now set that beside Herodotus's list. The same transaction appears in the two records as two different kinds of thing. In the accountant's version it is a fixed annual liability, denominated in Babylonian talents, due whether or not the harvest came in, with a schedule of arrears behind it. In the King's version it is a voluntary presentation of the characteristic good of each land, received with cordiality.

Neither is a lie. The Cilician cavalry really was paid out of the Cilician assessment; the Armenians really did bring horses. What differs is the frame, and this is the information asymmetry of this study in its purest form — but with a twist the colonial cases do not have. In a colonial empire the two versions have to be kept apart by active work, because the metropole and the colony are joined by newspapers and parliaments and returning soldiers. Here no work was required at all. The man who owed the assessment and the man who watched the procession were ninety days apart on foot, spoke different languages, and would never in their lives read each other's documents. The seam did not have to be managed. Distance managed it.

And there is a coda. When Alexander took Persepolis in 330 he burned it, and the buildings that suffered most were the Apadana and the Treasury. The picture of the gift, and the room where the gift was kept, went up together.

## Reading extraction against the framework

Four contributions and a prediction.

**Terminating extraction should be added to the corpus as a type.** Most extraction the collection has examined circulates: it pays soldiers, funds clients, builds infrastructure, and re-enters the economy it came from, which is one reason extractive orders can be genuinely productive. Achaemenid extraction, at least at the top of the pyramid, *terminated*. Metal came in, was melted and stored, and was cut into as required. **A ruler who converts extraction into a hoard is not hoarding out of avarice; he is buying the only insurance his structure permits him to buy.** Diodorus states the reason and it is exactly right — accumulated unused as a protection against reverses. And the reason the insurance had to be metal rather than anything else follows from the previous modules: an empire that chartered its formation to its subjects has no reserve of loyalty to call on in an emergency, and must therefore hold a reserve of purchasing power with which to hire loyalty at short notice. **The hoard is the balance-sheet counterpart of the missing formation.** Where an order cannot draw on belief, it must be able to draw on bullion.

**And the hoard is therefore a target of a very specific kind.** An empire that concentrates two hundred years of surplus into two store rooms has manufactured a single object whose capture funds the conquest of the empire that made it. Alexander paid for the remainder of his campaign — the wages, the fleet, the Indian expedition, the debts of his soldiers — out of what he found at Susa and Persepolis. This is a general hazard worth stating: *a stored reserve is a contingent asset for the holder and a realised asset for whoever takes it*, and the more completely an order has substituted metal for belief, the more completely a single successful battle transfers its capacity to the winner.

**Extraction sorted by caste is confirmed, and the sorting can now be located precisely.** It does not happen at the point of assessment, where the schedule is a uniform provincial figure in silver. It happens at the point of *conversion*, as the provincial liability is broken downward into grain from a tenant, days of digging from a villager, a share of a date garden from a smallholder, and boys from a household. The schedule looks even; the incidence is not; and the exemptions established in the second module — Persis, the temple personnel, the great sanctuaries — sit above the conversion and never enter it. **A uniform-looking assessment resolved through local intermediaries will always sort by caste, because the intermediaries are themselves the caste structure.**

**The satrap as franchisee is the mechanism to carry forward.** Cilicia's hundred and forty talents retained out of five hundred is the design in the open, not a leak in it.

It buys real efficiency — the collector has a stake in the country's yield — and it creates a structural trap: because the collector's income is a share, every increase in imperial demand enriches him in absolute terms. An empire under fiscal pressure that can only raise the assessment is an empire systematically strengthening its provincial governors relative to its centre, and it has no other lever, because — as the previous module established — it never built an apparatus that could reach past them to the villages.

**The prediction, for the modules on collapse.** The hoard explains the speed of 330 as much as the switchable apex does. An invader who wins two battles and takes two treasuries does not merely defeat this empire; he acquires the instrument with which it was held. And the men who had been holding it for the King — the satraps, the priesthoods, the collectors — are precisely the men who can be paid out of the same store, at the same rates, by whoever now controls the store. That is not the collapse of a system. It is a change in the name on the account.

## A note on sources.

Quoted exactly, from a public-domain source: Herodotus, *Histories* 3.90 on the Cilician assessment and its retained portion, and 3.96 on the melting and storing of the tribute, both in A. D. Godley's Loeb translation of 1921. The reservations about Herodotus's tribute list stated in the previous module apply here unchanged; the Cilician figures are used for the *structure* they reveal — a stated local retention — rather than for their exact value.

Paraphrased and not quoted: Diodorus Siculus on the treasuries at Susa and Persepolis, because the Loeb translation of Book 17 is modern and in copyright; the foundation text DSf from Susa, because Roland Kent's standard English translation of 1950 is in copyright; and the Apadana reliefs, which are described rather than reproduced.

Paraphrased from modern scholarship, briefly and with credit: Muhammad Dandamaev and Vladimir Lukonin on Darius's fiscal reform of about 519 and the Babylonian cadastral documents that accompany it; the standard treatments of Achaemenid coinage and of the regional limits of monetisation; and the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* account of the Apadana reliefs, including the detail that a Persian or Median usher leads each delegation's head by the hand, and the identification of the twenty-three delegations, which is itself not certain at every point.

Figures and their uncertainties, given as ranges. The Susa treasure is reported at forty to fifty thousand talents across Diodorus, Strabo, Curtius, Plutarch, Arrian and Justin, with Diodorus adding nine thousand talents of coined gold. The Persepolis treasure is given as a hundred and twenty thousand talents by Diodorus, a hundred and eighty

thousand by Strabo and a hundred and ninety thousand by Justin; the lowest of these is on the order of three thousand tons of silver-equivalent, and all should be read as magnitudes rather than counts, since none of these authors was present and all were working at several removes. The twenty-eight per cent retention at Cilicia is exact only in Herodotus's arithmetic, and there is no way to know whether comparable retentions elsewhere were similar. No estimate is offered of the proportion of total imperial revenue that was hoarded rather than spent, because the expenditure side is almost entirely unrecoverable: we know what the treasuries held at the end, and we do not know what passed through them on the way.

MODULE 7

# You Must Not Hold It to Be Lies

*Module 7 · information and suppression — an empire that could publish to every province in a fortnight and could not find out what was happening in any of them, and a king who instructed his readers in advance not to disbelieve him*

## Two problems, one solved

Every order has two information problems and they are not the same problem.

The first runs upward: knowing what is actually happening in the places it governs — whether the harvest failed, whether the governor is stealing, whether the garrison is loyal, whether the discontent in a province is grumbling or the beginning of a revolt. The second runs downward: being believed — getting its own account of itself into the heads of the people who matter, and keeping rival accounts out.

The Achaemenid empire built a remarkable instrument for the second problem and almost nothing for the first, and this module is about that asymmetry and what it cost.

## Ninety days, or a fortnight

Start with the physical instrument, which Herodotus describes in the most famous passage ever written about a postal service. In G. C. Macaulay's translation:

*Now there is nothing mortal which accomplishes a journey with more speed than these messengers, so skilfully has this been invented by the Persians: for they say that according to the number of days of which the entire journey consists, so many horses and men are set at intervals, each man and horse appointed for a day's journey. These neither snow nor rain nor heat nor darkness of night prevents from accomplishing each one the task proposed to him, with the very utmost speed. The first then rides and delivers the message with which he is charged to the second, and the second to the third; and after that it goes through them handed from one to the other, as in the torch-race among the Hellenes, which they perform for Hephaistos. This kind of running of their horses the Persians call angareion.*

It is worth noticing what occasions the description. Herodotus introduces the relay because Xerxes has just used it — to send word home of the disaster at Salamis. The first thing the fastest communication system in the world is shown carrying, in the only narrative we have of it in operation, is a report of a defeat travelling toward the King.

The system is corroborated from the Persian side. The Persepolis tablets show travellers on official business drawing rations at stations along the roads on the authority of sealed documents issued by the king or by officials of satrapal rank, specifying what each party was entitled to. That is a real, administered, audited network, and it made the empire's roads usable in a way nothing before it had.

But return to the arithmetic of the landscape: ninety days on foot from Sardis to Susa, and something on the order of a week or two for a courier on the relay. The relay is a spectacular improvement, and it improves one direction far more than the other, for reasons that are structural rather than technical.

What the King sends outward is a command. It is short, it is unambiguous, it originates with him, and its meaning does not degrade in transit. What comes back inward is a report. It is long, it is contestable, it concerns events nobody at the centre witnessed, and — this is the whole difficulty — it is composed by the person whose conduct it describes. A hundred and eleven post-houses make the King's orders arrive faster. They do not make a satrap's account of his own province any more true.

So the relay is a command instrument before it is an information instrument. The hypothesis flagged in the first module is confirmed here, and its consequence should be stated flatly: the Achaemenid King could reach any province in a fortnight and could learn almost nothing about any province except from the men he was trying to supervise.

## The publication programme

Now the second problem, which the empire solved with a sophistication that has been underrated because the evidence for it is scattered across three continents.

At Behistun, on the road between Babylon and Ecbatana, Darius had his account of his accession and the great revolt cut into a cliff face about a hundred metres above the ground, in Old Persian, Elamite and Babylonian, with a relief above it. It is, as a monument, unreadable. Nobody standing on the road below could make out a word of it; the modern decipherment required men on ropes.

The reason that does not matter is given by Darius himself, in the passage of the inscription which is the single most important document in this module. In the translation of L. W. King and R. C. Thompson, published in 1907 and out of copyright:

*King Darius says: By the grace of Ahuramazda this is the inscription which I have made. Besides, it was in Aryan script, and it was composed on clay tablets and on parchment. Besides, a sculptured figure of myself I made. Besides, I made my lineage.*

*And it was inscribed and was read off before me. Afterwards this inscription I sent off everywhere among the provinces. The people unitedly worked upon it.*

Composed on clay tablets and on parchment. Read back to the King for approval. Then sent off everywhere among the provinces.

That is a publication programme described by the publisher, and we can check it, because copies survive at both ends of the empire. A fragmentary Aramaic version on papyrus was found among the Jewish garrison documents at Elephantine, at the first cataract of the Nile — a version of Darius's accession narrative, in the chancery language, in a soldiers' settlement roughly two thousand miles from the cliff. And a version in Akkadian on stone was found at Babylon. The claim in the inscription is not a boast. It is a description of a distribution that we can independently observe.

Hold the two halves of that together, because the combination is the finding. The monument is on a cliff nobody can read: that is the archive copy, addressed to posterity and to the god. The distributed versions, on parchment and clay and stone, in Aramaic and Akkadian and whatever else, are the publication, addressed to officials and garrisons and subject elites across five million square kilometres. This empire had a press.

## The doctrine of the Lie

What it published is worth reading for its shape as well as its content, because the shape is an information doctrine.

Darius's account is organised around a single category. The provinces that revolted did so, he says, because of the Lie. In King and Thompson's rendering: *As to these provinces which revolted, lies made them revolt, so that they deceived the people.* Every rival claimant in the narrative is introduced with the formula that he lied, saying he was somebody he was not. And the instruction to Darius's successors is explicit: *You who shall be king hereafter, protect yourself vigorously from lies; punish the liars well, if thus you shall think, "May my country be secure!"*

Read structurally, this converts every political dispute into a category error. A man who claims the throne is not a rival with a case; he is a liar, and what is owed to him is not an answer but a punishment. That is enormously convenient — it forecloses argument entirely — and it has a cost the empire paid later, because an order that classifies dissent as falsehood has no vocabulary for negotiating with it and no instrument for handling it short of force.

And then comes the sentence that gives this module its title, and it is the most revealing thing Darius ever said. *This is what I have done, by the grace of Ahuramazda have I always acted. Whosoever shall read this inscription hereafter, let that which I have*

*done be believed. You must not hold it to be lies.* Followed immediately by an oath: he calls his god to witness that the account is true and not false.

A text that instructs its readers not to disbelieve it is a text whose author knows that disbelief is available. Darius had taken the throne by killing a man who was either an impostor or the legitimate son of Cyrus, and he had then fought nineteen battles in a year against people who evidently did not accept his version. He is not writing into a vacuum of opinion. He is writing into a contested field, from a position he knows to be contested, and the anxiety is legible on the face of the monument.

This is what the framework means by the robe being tested rather than revealed. The doctrine of truth against the Lie is not a serene metaphysic. It is a claim made under pressure by a man with a great deal to explain.

## What the record does not contain

The negative side of the ledger is as informative as the positive, and it needs handling with care because the obvious reading is probably wrong.

There is no Persian account of Marathon, of Salamis, of Plataea, or of any other defeat. There is no Persian narrative history of the empire at all. After Xerxes the royal inscriptions become increasingly formulaic — the same titulary, the same lands, the same invocation, with the names changed. The entire literary record of the Achaemenid empire as a sequence of events was written by Greeks, most of whom had fought it.

The tempting inference is suppression: that the defeats were censored. The Assyria and Babylon studies in this collection suggest a better one. An Assyrian king reports conquests at length because he was assessed on the god's expanding domain; a Neo-Babylonian king reports bricks and offerings and never names an enemy or a battle, because he was assessed on the god's provisioning. A royal inscription is a performance report submitted to a principal, and its contents tell you what its author was being scored on. The Achaemenid king was scored on holding an order together against the Lie and on the lands that acknowledged him — which is exactly what the inscriptions list. Salamis does not appear because it did not belong in the genre, not because a censor removed it.

That reading should be held with a hedge. Absence is compatible with both explanations, and the two are not exclusive: a genre that has no place for defeats is a very convenient genre to have. What can be said is that no positive evidence of a suppression apparatus survives, and that the silence has an available innocent explanation which the corpus has independently established elsewhere.

## The one suppression we can see

There is, however, one episode where something was done to a record, and it is the most consequential event in the empire's documentary history.

In 484, early in the reign of Xerxes, Babylonia revolted twice, under Bel-shimanni and then Shamash-eriba, and both risings were put down. What happened next is visible in the archives rather than in any narrative. A large number of Babylonian temple and family archives — from Babylon, Borsippa, Sippar and other northern cities, families who had held prebends and offices for generations — stop, abruptly, in Xerxes' second year. The phenomenon is known in the scholarship as the end of archives, and the interpretation associated above all with Caroline Waerzeggers is that Xerxes broke the traditional northern Babylonian notability, removing the families whose positions had survived every previous change of regime.

The thesis is widely accepted and not universally, and this study states it as a strong hypothesis rather than a fact. But its significance for method is independent of whether the mechanism was purge, confiscation, or something less dramatic. Where a subject elite kept records, we can see the empire; where that elite was removed, our sight goes out. And the going-out is nearly invisible, because the people who would have described the event are the people the event removed. The single largest interruption in our evidence for Achaemenid rule coincides exactly with the single episode in which the crown is thought to have moved decisively against a subject elite — and if that is right, then our picture of the empire after 484 is systematically thinner precisely where it was most coercive.

## The seam that managed itself

The previous module observed that the same transaction appeared as a fixed liability in a Greek's tribute list and as a joyful procession on the Apadana staircase, and that no work was needed to keep those two versions apart, because their audiences were ninety days apart on foot and did not share a language.

That is worth stating as the general finding, with one qualification.

The qualification is that there *was* an audience whose belief mattered, and it was not the subject peasantry. Behistun was cut in Old Persian first, and the publication clause — the passage about clay tablets and parchment and sending it off among the provinces — appears in the Old Persian version and is absent from the Babylonian. The primary addressee of this robe is Iranian: the Persian and Median nobility whose adherence the King required and who could kill him if they withdrew it. The Aramaic and Akkadian versions are for administration and for display, and their existence tells us

the empire could reach subject elites when it wanted to. What it never attempted was to reach anybody below them.

## Reading information against the framework

Four contributions and a prediction.

**Distance is a substitute for suppression, and it makes an order structurally incapable of suppressing.** The colonial studies found a seam that required continuous work: keeping what the metropole believed apart from what the colony experienced, because newspapers, parliaments and returning soldiers kept threatening to join the two ends. Here the ends could not meet, and no work was required. **Where an order's audiences are separated by distance and language rather than by policy, it will not build a suppression apparatus — and will therefore have none when it needs one.** The confirmation is the entire historiographical record of this empire, which was written by its enemies and which it made not the slightest attempt to answer. Persia did not lose the propaganda war with Greece. It never noticed there was one.

**Downward publication and upward blindness are separable, and this empire achieved the first while abandoning the second.** State the rule: *a relay optimised for the transmission of commands does not thereby produce knowledge, because commands are short and originate at the centre while reports are long and originate with the person being reported on.* The King could publish to every province in a fortnight and could learn about a province only from its governor. **An order that can command faster than it can verify will accumulate officers it cannot audit.** That is the mechanism to carry into the modules on elite coordination and collapse, because it is the structural precondition of the fourth-century satrapal revolts: not a failure of loyalty, but an information architecture in which loyalty could never be checked.

**The Lie is an administrative category dressed as a theology, and it forecloses more than it wins.** Classifying every rival claim as falsehood removes the need to answer it, which is why the doctrine is attractive; but it also removes the possibility of a negotiated settlement with anybody who disagrees, because there is no recognised status for a person who is wrong in good faith. **A regime that files dissent under falsehood retains only one instrument for handling it.** And the doctrine's own text contains the confession: an author who tells his reader not to hold the account to be lies is an author who knows the account is one claim among several, and expects to be doubted.

**And the archive rule, sharpened.** The correction that opened this collaboration was that the robe survives at a rate the floor does not, because beneficiaries keep records. The end of archives in 484 sharpens it into something more uncomfortable:

*our evidence for an order is densest exactly where that order was least coercive, and goes dark exactly where it was most so*, because the coercion consists in removing the people who keep the records. An empire that broke one subject elite and paid another will be remembered by the one it paid. This is not a caveat to be noted and set aside. It is the shape of everything we know about Achaemenid Persia, and it is why this study's picture of the fifth century is so much thinner than its picture of the sixth.

## A note on sources.

Quoted exactly, from public-domain sources: Herodotus, *Histories* 8.98 on the angareion, in G. C. Macaulay's translation of 1890; and the Behistun inscription, paragraphs 54, 55, 56 and 70, in the translation of L. W. King and R. C. Thompson, *The Sculptures and Inscription of Darius the Great on the Rock of Behistûn in Persia* (London, 1907). The King and Thompson text as it circulates today has been lightly modernised in places and the reading of paragraph 70 in particular has been improved since 1907 — the Old Persian is badly eroded at exactly that point and the passage has been re-collated in recent scholarship — so the wording quoted should be treated as a sound but century-old rendering of a damaged text whose general sense is not in dispute. Roland Kent's standard translation of 1950 is in copyright and is not used.

Paraphrased and not quoted: the Persepolis material on sealed travel authorisations and station rations, because the editions are modern; the Aramaic Behistun papyrus from Elephantine, catalogued as Papyrus Berlin 13447, and the Akkadian version on stone from Babylon, both described rather than quoted.

Paraphrased from modern scholarship, briefly and with credit: Caroline Waerzeggers's identification of the abrupt termination of northern Babylonian archives in Xerxes' second year, and its association with the suppression of the revolts of 484 — a thesis that has been widely adopted and is not unanimous, and which this module treats as a strong hypothesis rather than a settled fact; and the general scholarly scepticism, associated particularly with Pierre Briant, about whether the "King's Eye" of the Greek sources corresponds to any formal Achaemenid institution rather than being largely a Greek literary construction, which is why that famous apparatus does not appear in the argument above.

Dates and uncertainties. Behistun was cut in the years following Darius's accession in 522. The Elephantine Aramaic copy is a fifth-century document and is fragmentary, with parts of some fourteen paragraphs legible out of an original of perhaps eleven columns. The Babylonian revolts and their suppression are dated to 484. No figure is given for the number of copies of the Behistun text distributed, or for the speed of the relay in practice, because neither is recoverable; the frequently repeated figure of seven

to nine days from Susa to Sardis is a modern calculation from Herodotus's stage-count and not an attested transit time.

MODULE 8

# Protect the Family of These Men

*Module 8 · elite coordination and the default — an arrangement in which every member's self-defence reproduced the whole, and which for that exact reason could never settle who should be king*

## What is being tracked

This module is not about the man in the field. He was priced in the fifth module and he is not a member of the arrangement; he is what the arrangement is for.

The default is a property of durable hierarchies, and it is an observation before it is a theory. In an order that lasts, the positions are set up so that each holder's defence of his own standing is, without his intending it, a defence of the whole. The prebendary protecting his prebend protects the temple that grants it; the temple protecting its endowment protects the crown that confirms it; the satrap protecting his province protects the King whose commission he holds. Nobody coordinates. Nobody needs to like anybody. The arrangement is maintained by the ordinary self-interest of people who would not cross the street for one another, and it is maintained tirelessly, because each of them is defending something he cannot afford to lose.

And the same logic locates the fracture. It comes where a group that has standing and means stops finding the arrangement worth defending — not from the bottom, which has neither, but from somewhere inside, from people with something to fight with.

The Achaemenid case gives an unusually clean reading on both halves, and the reading is strange. The default here was close to perfect at every level below the throne, for two centuries. At the throne it was absent altogether. And the second fact is caused by the first.

## The compact, recorded twice

Begin with what the founders wrote down, because it is one of the few places in the ancient world where the terms of an elite settlement survive in two independent traditions.

Darius names his co-conspirators on the cliff at Behistun. In King and Thompson's translation of 1907:

*King Darius says: These are the men who were with me when I slew Gaumâta the Magian, who was called Smerdis; then these men helped me as my followers: Intaphrenes, son of Vayâspâra, a Persian; Otanes, son of Thukhra, a Persian; Gobryas, son of Mardonius, a Persian; Hydarnes, son of Bagâbigna, a Persian; Megabyzus, son of Dâtuvahya, a Persian; Ardumaniš, son of Vakauka, a Persian.*

And then, immediately, the clause that gives this module its title:

*King Darius says: You who may be king hereafter, protect the family of these men.*

That is the default written into stone by a founder: an instruction to every future holder of the throne, in perpetuity, to preserve the standing of the houses that put the first one there. It is not a sentiment. It is a term of the arrangement, published across the empire on parchment and clay, and it is addressed to the only party in a position to break it.

Herodotus, working from a Persian tradition a century later, gives the same compact from the other side, in George Rawlinson's translation. Of the privileges the conspirators agreed among themselves: *It was to be free to each, whenever he pleased, to enter the palace unannounced, unless the king were in the company of one of his wives; and the king was to be bound to marry into no family excepting those of the conspirators.*

Two clauses, and both are about access. The right to walk in on the King without being announced is the physical form of standing at the top of this hierarchy — it says that these six men are not petitioners. And the marriage restriction is a closure device: it makes the royal line a permanent joint venture of seven houses and forecloses the King's ability to build a new constituency by marrying elsewhere.

Herodotus adds that Otanes, who had argued for putting the government in the hands of the people and lost the argument, withdrew from the contest for the throne on a single condition — that neither he nor his descendants should be subject to any of the others, but should live free and bound only by the laws. Whether or not that is history, it is the exemption instrument of the second module applied at the very top: the same forbearance, the same conveyance of relief rather than property, granted now to a great house rather than to a priesthood.

## The compact broken, at once, by its author

Now watch what happened to it.

Darius married Atossa and Artystone, daughters of Cyrus, and Parmys, daughter of Cyrus's son. Of those three marriages not one is within the compact, and each of them attaches him to the previous dynasty rather than to his six colleagues. He did also marry Otanes's daughter Phaidyme, which observes the letter in one instance out of four.

And then there is Intaphrenes, who is named first in the list at Behistun. Herodotus tells the story and it is the most instructive thing in this module. Intaphrenes came to the palace wishing to see the King and was told by the doorkeeper and the chamberlain that the King was with a woman; believing they lied, he cut off their ears and their noses. In Godley's translation of what followed:

*Darius, fearing that this might be a conspiracy of the six, sent for each severally and questioned him, to know if they approved the deed; and being assured that they had no part in it, he seized Intaphrenes with his sons and all his household — for he much suspected that the man was plotting a rebellion with his kinsfolk — and imprisoned them with intent to put them to death.*

The first man to assert the privilege was destroyed for asserting it, along with his sons and his household, by the King who had cut the instruction to protect these families into a cliff. And the other five, questioned one by one, disclaimed him.

Hold what that reveals. A compact among equals, published, sworn, and inscribed — and within a few years the sovereign killed one of the parties and the remaining parties each individually calculated that saying nothing was the better option. Which is the default working exactly as the framework describes: each of the five defended his own position, and the defence of his own position meant not standing with Intaphrenes.

**An elite compact with no mechanism of enforcement against the sovereign is a schedule of privileges rather than a constitution.** It has the same property as every other instrument in this study: it is revocable, and its holders live at the crown's discretion.

## What the default nonetheless did

And yet — and this is the point that must not be lost in the drama — the families endured. Gobryas's son Mardonius commanded the army in Greece. Hydarnes's line commanded the royal guard. Otanes's son led the men of Persis in Xerxes' army. Descendants of the six held satrapies and commands for generations. The compact was unenforceable and it was substantially honoured, because honouring it cost the King nothing and breaking it cost him a great deal.

That is the default, stated precisely. It did not hold because anybody could compel it. It held because the arrangement made it the interest of everyone concerned, including the King, that it should.

Below the great houses the same mechanism runs all the way down, and the preceding modules have already documented every layer of it. A satrap retains a stated share of the assessment and funds his own establishment from it, so his prosperity is

the province's prosperity, and his interest in remitting is the interest of a franchisee in keeping the franchise. A Babylonian prebendary holds an income sourced in a god and confirmed by a crown that has never interfered with either. An Egyptian priesthood holds an endowment restored by royal order and a law codified at royal expense. A Judaean priest holds a fiscal immunity, a subsidy for his sacrifices, and a royal commission to appoint judges over his own people. Not one of them is asked to love the King. Every one of them is holding something that the King's existence secures and that a disturbance would put at risk.

And the mechanism can be watched operating without any Persian in the room. In the fifth chapter of Nehemiah, a province is close to breaking: smallholders mortgaged, children sold, and the king's tribute named aloud as the cause. The remedy is applied by the local elite to the local elite — an assembly, an oath before the priests, and the restoration of pledged land by Jewish creditors. Nobody in that scene is defending the Persian empire. Everybody in that scene is defending the conditions under which their own positions continue, and the sum of what they are defending is the Persian empire.

## Where it fractured, and why

Now the fracture, and the case is unambiguous.

Egypt revolted against Persian rule at the death of Cambyses, again at the death of Darius, again in the 460s under Inaros with Athenian help, and again in 404, when it achieved sixty years of genuine independence under native dynasties before Artaxerxes III reconquered it in 343 — after which it revolted once more within five years. No other province in the empire behaves like this.

The reflexive explanation is that Egypt was oppressed worse than everywhere else. There is no good evidence for that, and some against it: Cambyses cut the temple subsidies and Darius restored them and codified Egyptian law, which is on its face better treatment than most provinces received.

The structural explanation is available and it fits the user's formulation exactly, with one sharpening. Egypt possessed something no other province had: a *complete* alternative hierarchy. It had a kingship that could be restored, a priesthood competent to crown one, a scribal class, a legal tradition, an economy that did not depend on the empire, and a defensible frontier. An Egyptian priest under Persia held the second rank in somebody else's arrangement; the same man under a native pharaoh held the first rank in his own.

So the fracture condition should be stated more precisely than deprivation. **A group with standing and means fractures not when its position deteriorates but when a superior position becomes available to it.** Egypt's elite did not stop

benefiting from the Achaemenid arrangement. It could simply do better, and it knew it could, because it had done so within remembered history.

The test of the formulation is Babylonia, which does the opposite. Babylonia was richer than Egypt, was taxed heavily, and after 484 was — on the reading examined in the last module — subjected to the one act of deliberate elite destruction in the empire's history. It revolted twice, in 522 and 484, and then never again for a century and a half. Babylonia had no restorable kingship. Its old dynasty was gone, its coordinating class held prebends rather than a throne, and there was nothing better available. Greater burden and less revolt, because the alternative was absent.

## Revolt inside the default, which looks like fracture and is not

The 360s produce what the sources present as a general rising of the western satraps — Datames in Cappadocia, Ariobarzanes in Hellespontine Phrygia, Orontes in Armenia, Mausolus in Caria, Autophradates in Lydia — and it is conventionally called the Great Satraps' Revolt.

Two corrections are needed and both are instructive.

The first is scholarly: the reading of these events as one coordinated revolt rests heavily on Diodorus, and Michael Weiskopf and others have argued that what actually occurred was a series of separate local disturbances which a later narrative gathered into a single conspiracy. On the evidence, the satraps were not acting together in any organised way.

The second is more important and it can be read off the outcomes. Orontes betrayed his fellow rebels and was restored to favour. Mausolus remained in office and his dynasty prospered. Autophradates was reconciled. Most of the participants, in short, ended where they began, and several ended better. That is not what happens to men who have attempted secession. It is what happens to men who have been bargaining.

Which yields a diagnostic worth keeping. **The question to ask of any elite revolt is whether the demand is for a different position inside the arrangement or for exit from it.** Datames and Ariobarzanes wanted standing, security, and terms; when terms were available, most took them. Egypt wanted to be Egypt. The first is the default under stress and the second is the default broken, and they look identical from a distance.

## Where it failed absolutely

And now the throne, where the whole analysis comes together.

Set out the successions. Cyrus to Cambyses passed without recorded incident. After that: Cambyses died in 522 amid a usurpation whose nature is still argued over, and Darius took the throne by killing a man who was either an impostor or Cyrus's son, and then fought, by his own count, nineteen battles in a single year. Darius's own succession was disputed between two sons and settled at court. Xerxes was murdered in 465 by the commander of his guard, and the succession fought out among his sons. Artaxerxes I's death in 424 produced a son who reigned forty-five days before being killed, a second who was killed after some months, and a third who survived. Darius II's succession was challenged in 401 by his younger son Cyrus, who raised an army including ten thousand Greek mercenaries and died at Cunaxa. Artaxerxes II's succession involved the deaths of rival brothers. Artaxerxes III was poisoned in 338 by his own chief minister, his son Arses was poisoned in 336 by the same man, and Darius III was installed by that minister and then poisoned him. Darius III was killed in 330 by his own kinsman and satrap.

Of roughly ten transmissions of the throne across two hundred and thirty years, the substantial majority involved murder, usurpation, civil war, or all three. No empire in this collection has a worse record.

Why? The temptation is to reach for decadence, or harem politics, or the character of particular kings, and all of those are available in the Greek sources because the Greek sources love them. The structural answer is better and it follows from everything this study has established.

**Nobody in the arrangement had any stake in which Achaemenid held the throne, because every charter in the empire ran to the office and not to the man.**

Consider it from each position. A Babylonian prebendary's income is sourced in Marduk and confirmed by whoever is king; it does not change if Xerxes' son rather than Xerxes' other son is on the throne. An Egyptian priest's endowment is the same endowment. A Judaean priest's immunity from toll, tribute and custom survives any change of person. A satrap's franchise is renewed by whoever holds the seal. A great house's standing depends on being a great house, and great houses were on both sides of every succession fight and were on the winning side by the time it ended.

The default therefore protects the arrangement and is *indifferent to the man*. And an arrangement in which everybody's position survives the fight is an arrangement in which nobody has an interest in preventing the fight. There is no constituency for orderly succession because orderly succession benefits no one in particular. It benefits the empire in the abstract, and the empire in the abstract has no defenders — only the arrangement has defenders, and the arrangement is fine.

That is the module's finding and it should be held against the corpus. The warlord's dilemma cases in this collection — Diocletian, Tokugawa — show rulers building elaborate succession machinery precisely because their elites were tied to *them*, so that a disputed succession would have unmade the settlement. Persia never built any such machinery in two centuries, and the reason is not oversight. It never needed one, because its settlement was never at risk from a succession. What it lost instead was a king at a time.

## Cyrus the Younger, and what a Persian civil war looked like

The clearest picture is 401. A royal prince, satrap of Lydia, raises an army against his reigning brother and marches from Sardis to the Euphrates, and he hires ten thousand Greek mercenaries to help. Persian grandees serve on both sides. Tissaphernes, who had informed on Cyrus, commanded against him and was rewarded. When Cyrus was killed the Greek army walked home and the empire went on exactly as before.

Nothing about that campaign was an attack on the Achaemenid order. Every participant on both sides expected to hold his position under whichever brother won, and almost all of them did. It is the default operating at full strength — and the thing it is protecting is precisely not the person of the King.

## Reading the default against the framework

Four contributions, an open problem, and a prediction.

**The completeness of a default below the apex can be the direct cause of the apex's undefendedness, and this is the module's principal addition to the corpus.** State it as a rule: *where an order's beneficiaries hold their positions of the office and not of the man, the default will carry the arrangement through any change of person, including a violent one, and will therefore generate no constituency for orderly succession.* The cheapness of a chartered order and the lethality of its successions are not two facts to be balanced but one fact described twice — the same identity this study found in the third and fourth modules between cheapness and brittleness. An order that has made itself indifferent to who rules it has, by that act, made the question of who rules it undecidable by anything except violence.

**The fracture condition is availability, not deprivation.** The observation that fracture comes from a group with standing and means is confirmed, and the Egyptian and Babylonian cases together specify it. **A group with standing and means defects when a superior arrangement becomes available to it, not when its present arrangement worsens.** Egypt, better treated and richer, revolted six times because it

retained a complete indigenous hierarchy into which its elite could ascend. Babylonia, taxed harder and — after 484 — actively broken, stopped revolting because it had nowhere better to go. The predictive value is considerable: to find where an empire will fracture, do not look for the worst-treated province. Look for the province whose elite could hold a higher rank in an order of its own.

**Elite revolt must be sorted by demand, not by scale.** The diagnostic is whether the rebels want a different position inside the arrangement or want out of it, and the tell is what happens afterwards: rebels who are reconciled and reinstated were bargaining. The satrapal disturbances of the 360s look, at a distance, like the empire coming apart, and they were the default under stress, with most participants back in office within a few years. Egypt in 404 looks similar and was categorically different. **A rebellion that ends in reinstatement was never a rebellion against the order.**

**And a compact at the top is subject to the same instrument as a settlement at the bottom.** The privileges of the Seven — unannounced entry, the marriage restriction, Otanes's exemption from obedience — are exactly the exemption device of the second module, granted to great houses instead of priesthoods, and they carry the same property: revocable at the sovereign's discretion, with no enforcement mechanism except the sovereign's own interest. Intaphrenes discovered this within a few years of Behistun, and the other five men named on the cliff each independently decided that his own position was better served by silence. The instruction *protect the family of these men* was cut into stone by a king who had already destroyed one of the families in question.

**The open problem, stated as open.** In two hundred and thirty years, with a succession mechanism this bad and great houses this powerful, no non-Achaemenid ever successfully took the throne. Bagoas made and unmade kings and always made Achaemenid ones. Bessus, in 330, declared himself king and was destroyed by other Persians. The explanation is not obvious and this study will not manufacture one. The best available hypothesis, to be tested in the final modules, is that the charters themselves required it: every arrangement in the empire ran in the King's name, and the subject elites' instruments — the immunities, the confirmations, the commissions — were held of an Achaemenid. A usurper from outside the line would have had nothing to offer the men who actually held the empire together, because what they held was defined by the family he was displacing. If that is right, then the dynasty survived because of the chartering, and the same mechanism that made the throne worth murdering for made it impossible to occupy as anybody else.

**The prediction, for the modules on collapse.** If the default is indifferent to the man and the dynasty is protected only by the charters running in its name, then an

outsider who is willing to issue the same charters faces no coordinated resistance at all. He does not have to defeat the arrangement. He has to defeat the man, and then confirm everybody in post. That is not a theory about 330. It is what the arrangement was built to do, and it had been doing it, internally, for two centuries.

## A note on sources.

Quoted exactly, from public-domain sources: the Behistun inscription, paragraphs 68 and 69, in the translation of L. W. King and R. C. Thompson (London, 1907), with the qualification about that century-old rendering stated in the previous module; Herodotus, *Histories* 3.84 on the privileges of the seven, in George Rawlinson's translation; and Herodotus 3.119 on the destruction of Intaphrenes and his household, in A. D. Godley's Loeb translation of 1921. Herodotus's account of the conspiracy, the constitutional debate and Otanes's exemption is a Persian tradition transmitted through a Greek writing a century later and is not independent testimony; it is used here for the *terms* it reports, which agree in substance with Behistun's list of six names and its instruction concerning their families, and that agreement across two very different sources is the reason the compact is treated as real.

Paraphrased and not quoted: Darius's marriages, from Herodotus 3.88; the succession sequence, assembled from Herodotus, Ctesias as preserved in Photius, Xenophon, Diodorus and the Babylonian dated documents, none of which agree at every point; Xenophon's *Anabasis* for the campaign of Cyrus the Younger; and the events of the 360s from Diodorus.

Paraphrased from modern scholarship, briefly and with credit: Michael Weiskopf's argument that the so-called Great Satraps' Revolt is a construction of the later narrative tradition rather than a coordinated rising, a view now widely though not universally shared; the standard treatments of the Egyptian revolts and of the Twenty-eighth to Thirtieth Dynasties; and Caroline Waerzeggers on the Babylonian archives after 484, carried over from the previous module with the same hedge.

Dates and uncertainties. The accession of Darius is placed in 522, Xerxes' murder in 465, the death of Artaxerxes I in 424, Cunaxa in 401, Egyptian independence from 404 to 343, the poisoning of Artaxerxes III in 338, and the death of Darius III in 330. The succession of 424 involving Xerxes II and Sogdianus rests principally on Ctesias and the reign-lengths are approximate. The nature of Gaumata or Bardiya — impostor, or genuine son of Cyrus killed by a usurping Darius — is the oldest unsettled question in Achaemenid history, and nothing in this module depends on which answer is right; what matters is that the succession was contested by force, which both readings concede. No figure is offered for the number of Persian great houses, or for the

proportion of satrapies held by descendants of the six, because the prosopography is incomplete and the identifications are frequently disputed.

MODULE 9

# A Law That the King Might Do Whatever He Pleased

*Module 9 · plurality or foreclosure — courts that existed, petitions that were answered, one Greek city that got a constitution out of somebody else's problem, and the difference between a liberty that is won and a liberty that is licensed*

## The question, and why it is not about the peasant

The question this module asks is not whether the Achaemenid empire was tolerant. It plainly was, in the sense that it left a great many people alone, and the preceding modules have explained why that was cheap rather than kind.

The question is narrower and harder. There is a state apparatus. Is there any protection *from* it? Can a man petition, and is the petition answered? Is there a court that will hear him against an official? Can any body of people assemble and decide anything? And if such protections exist, where did they come from — because the man in the field did not create them and could not have. Protections are made by factions inside the hierarchy, bargaining from a position of strength, at moments when neither they nor the apex wants to destroy the arrangement. A concession is made, it is written down, and it accretes. Over centuries the accumulated residue of such fights is what a later age calls a constitution.

So: look for the fights. Look especially for any case where somebody below the nobility acquired a protection, because that never happens on its own — it happens as a byproduct of a quarrel among people who matter.

And in this case, look also for what was lost, because a liberty can be extinguished as well as granted, and the extinguishing is usually invisible.

## The apparatus that existed, and it was not nothing

Start with the honest positive account, because a study that reaches its conclusion by understating the evidence has cheated.

There were judges, and they were a real institution with a described tenure. Herodotus, in George Rawlinson's translation: *the royal judges are certain picked men among the Persians, who hold their office for life, or until they are found guilty of some*

*misconduct. By them justice is administered in Persia, and they are the interpreters of the old laws, all disputes being referred to their decision.*

Life tenure, removable only for misconduct, charged with interpreting inherited law, and a general jurisdiction. Stated that way it sounds like the beginning of something. And it is corroborated from the Persian side: the Persepolis archive records judges being dispatched and provisioned as they travelled, which means an actual circuit of adjudication existed and was funded.

There was petition, and it was used. The Judaean garrison at Elephantine, having lost its temple, petitioned the governor of Judah and the sons of the governor of Samaria and eventually obtained an authorisation to rebuild — a licence obtained by a small provincial community writing letters to officials hundreds of miles away. From Egypt there survives a long Demotic petition, on the papyrus known as Rylands IX, in which a priest of Teuzoi named Peteisi sets out at enormous length how his family was cheated of its temple offices and revenues across three generations, and addresses the complaint up the administrative chain. Whatever the outcome, that document exists because a provincial priest believed there was somewhere to send it.

There was arbitration, and it was imposed as policy. After the Ionian revolt, in Rawlinson's translation: *Artaphernes, satrap of Sardis, summoned deputies from all the Ionian cities, and forced them to enter into agreements with one another, not to harass each other by force of arms, but to settle their disputes by reference. He likewise took the measurement of their whole country in parasangs... and settled the tributes which the several cities were to pay, at a rate that has continued unaltered from the time when Artaphernes fixed it down to the present day. The rate was very nearly the same as that which had been paid before the revolt.*

Read that carefully. A satrap, having just crushed a rebellion, compels the rebels to bind themselves to arbitration instead of war, resurveys their land, and fixes their tribute at approximately what it had been. That is a settlement with content — a dispute-resolution mechanism and a predictable assessment — and it is more than most conquerors offer the defeated.

And there was assembly, of a kind, everywhere: the Babylonian temple assemblies went on conducting business, the Greek cities kept their institutions, the Judaean congregation was summoned and sworn in the fifth chapter of Nehemiah. Corporate bodies deliberated and decided things across the whole empire.

Anyone tallying only that would conclude the Achaemenid empire was among the more law-governed orders in this collection.

## What the protection was worth when tested

Now the test, and Herodotus supplies it in the most useful anecdote in Persian history.

Cambyses wished to marry his sister, which was not customary. He did not simply do it. He summoned the royal judges — the life-tenured interpreters of the old laws — and asked them whether any law permitted it. In Rawlinson's translation, *they gave him an answer which was at once true and safe — "they did not find any law," they said, "allowing a brother to take his sister to wife, but they found a law, that the king of the Persians might do whatever he pleased."*

Herodotus's own gloss is that they neither broke the law nor died for it. That is exactly right, and it is the whole finding of this module in a sentence. The institution existed. It was consulted. It answered honestly on the first question and then supplied, from within the law itself, the doctrine that the law does not bind the person asking.

And the judges' security of tenure — office for life, unless found guilty of misconduct — had a specific enforcement mechanism, which Herodotus also records. Cambyses found the judge Sisamnes guilty of a corrupt verdict, had him flayed, had the skin cut into strips and stretched over the seat on which he had given judgment, and appointed the dead man's son to sit on it. Whatever else that is, it is not judicial independence. It is a judiciary whose removal-for-misconduct clause is operated by the sovereign, in public, on the furniture.

One further restraint is attested and it should be given its due, because it is genuine. Herodotus, in Godley's translation, praising a Persian law: *it is a praiseworthy law, too, which does not allow the king himself to slay any one for a single offense, or any other Persian to do incurable harm to one of his servants for one offense. Not until an accounting shows that the offender's wrongful acts are more and greater than his services may a man give rein to his anger.*

That is a proportionality rule, binding on the King as well as on lesser men: no death for a single fault, and no irreparable harm until the ledger of a man's services has been weighed against his offences. It is a real protection and it is not rhetoric.

But notice whom it protects. It protects Persians, and it protects the servants of great men — that is, people inside the hierarchy, who have services to weigh in the first place. It says nothing about a Babylonian tenant or an Egyptian villager, who has rendered no services to any account-keeper and whose ledger, if opened, would be blank.

**Every protection in this empire protects somebody inside the arrangement.** That is not a scandal; it is the definition of the residue the framework is looking for.

Protections come from factions with standing, and they cover the factions that won them.

## The one restraint that bound the King, and what it did

There is a famous exception, and it needs handling with unusual care because it is the single most-cited constitutional claim ever made about Persia.

In the Book of Daniel, courtiers persuade the king to sign an irreversible decree, and when it turns out to condemn Daniel the king cannot undo it. In the Authorised Version: *Now, O king, establish the decree, and sign the writing, that it be not changed, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which altereth not.* In the Book of Esther the same principle appears from the other direction: the decree against the Jews cannot be revoked, and the remedy is a second decree, because *the writing which is written in the king's name, and sealed with the king's ring, may no man reverse.*

The provenance disqualifies these as evidence of Achaemenid practice. Daniel reached its final form in the second century BC and its Darius the Mede has no place in the historical sequence; Esther is a Hellenistic composition. These texts do not tell us what Persian kings did. They tell us what people in the Hellenistic east believed about how Persian kings had been constrained — and that belief is independently attested on the Greek side, where Diodorus reports that Darius III wished to spare a man he had condemned and could not reverse the sentence.

So there was a widely held tradition that the Persian king was bound by his own written word. And here is the finding, which is the sharpest thing in this module.

In every single one of those stories, the irreversibility operates to make the king *crueller*. Darius wants to save Daniel and is trapped by his own decree. Ahasuerus wants to protect the Jews and cannot cancel the extermination order. Darius III wants to pardon and cannot. The one limit on the sovereign that the whole tradition remembers is a limit that prevents mercy.

That is not an accident of storytelling. It follows from what this empire was. An order whose entire hold consists of instruments — grants, immunities, commissions, licences, confirmations — must make instruments binding, or it has nothing. A document that binds the King in favour of a priesthood is the same kind of object as a document that binds him against a favourite; irrevocability is neutral about content. **The empire's one genuine constitutional principle was a property of its paperwork, not a protection of its subjects, and it cut both ways because paper does.**

## Where the residue came from

Now the mechanism, tested against the three cases the record supplies.

**The Seven, 522.** The clearest instance in the study and the subject of the previous module. A coup, a moment of maximum leverage for a small faction, and a written schedule of privileges: unannounced access to the King's person, a restriction on royal marriage, and — for Otanes — a hereditary exemption from obedience for his family, bound only by the laws. Faction, strength, moment, concession, document. Textbook.

**Ionia, 493 to 492.** This is the case the user's rule predicts must exist, and it does.

After the revolt was crushed, Artaphernes imposed the arbitration settlement quoted above. And the following year, according to Herodotus, Mardonius went along the Ionian coast and did something Herodotus expects his Greek readers to disbelieve: he deposed the tyrants of the Ionian cities and set up democracies in them.

Take the mechanism apart, because the shape is the point. Nobody in Ionia won this. The demos of Miletus did not defeat anybody; it had just been defeated, comprehensively, and Miletus itself had been sacked. What happened is that the Persian administration reviewed the causes of a very expensive war and concluded that the tyrants — its own appointees, its own instrument of indirect rule — had been the problem. Aristagoras of Miletus, a Persian-backed tyrant, had started the revolt. So the empire removed the instrument that had failed and installed a different one.

The beneficiary was a group that had had no leverage whatever, and it received a constitution as the byproduct of a management quarrel between the imperial centre and its own class of clients. **Where a group below the nobility acquires a protection, look for the fight among people who mattered that it fell out of** — and here it is, on the one occasion in two centuries when the record lets us watch.

Three caveats, none of which damages the mechanism. It was probably not universal; Chios may have been excepted, and Herodotus does not report the measure extending beyond Ionia proper. It did not change the cities' subject status or their tribute. And Herodotus is the only witness. But the caveats sharpen rather than weaken the reading: what the Ionians got was a change of internal constitution and nothing else, which is exactly what a management decision would produce and not at all what a victory would.

**Judah.** The exemption from toll, tribute and custom, the subsidy for the sacrifices, and the commission to appoint judges over the province — examined in the second and fourth modules — were secured by a priestly faction with standing, at a moment when the crown wanted a quiet and payable province on the Egyptian road. Faction, leverage, concession, document. The same shape again.

## What was lost

The user's addition to the standard question is the right one, and it produces the most uncomfortable section in this study.

The old cities of Mesopotamia held ancient civic privileges. Babylon, Sippar, Nippur and others possessed charters of the kind Assyriologists discuss under the term *kidinnūtu* — exemptions from corvée, from certain levies, and from arbitrary seizure, attaching to a defined body of urban notables. The Assyria study in this collection examined the equivalent charter for Assur and what a king would and would not do to it. These were real, inherited, documented liberties, held by a specific class of families who had held them across every previous change of regime — Assyrian, Chaldean, Persian.

And then, in 484, they stop. As the seventh module set out, a large body of northern Babylonian temple and family archives terminates abruptly in Xerxes' second year, following two revolts, and the reading associated with Caroline Waerzeggers is that the crown broke the traditional urban notability. The thesis is widely though not universally accepted.

What matters here is the shape rather than the mechanism. A body of urban liberty older than the Persian empire, older than the Babylonian empire, held by identifiable families in the oldest cities in the world, disappears from view inside a two-year window — and disappears without any narrative of its disappearance, because the people who would have written that narrative are the people who were removed.

State the rule, because it belongs in the corpus. **A liberty held by a particular faction dies with that faction, and leaves no record of its dying.** The residue of factional fights accretes only so long as the factions that hold it survive; a privilege that is not held by somebody in particular is held by nobody, and nothing in an order like this converts a faction's privilege into a general right. And the archive rule from the seventh module applies with full force: we can see liberties being granted, because grantees keep documents and treasure them, and we cannot see liberties being extinguished, because the extinguished stop writing.

## Was there liberty

Set the account out plainly.

There was law, and courts, and life-tenured judges, and a circuit, and inherited legal traditions codified at royal expense. There was petition, and it was used by provincial priests and frontier garrisons and answered. There was arbitration imposed between cities. There were assemblies that deliberated. There was an extraordinary tolerated

plurality of gods, languages, laws and institutions — greater, probably, than any order this collection has examined.

And there was no protection from the apparatus, because the apparatus was the source of every protection. Each of them ran in the King's name. The Judaeans' immunity was a royal rescript; the Elephantine community could not rebuild its own altar without a permit, and the permit specified what might be burned on it; the Ionian constitutions were installed by a Persian general and could be uninstalled by one; the royal judges themselves, asked whether the law bound the King, answered that it did not.

Plurality was everywhere and none of it was held *against* the crown. That distinction is the whole answer to the module's question, and it is not a small one, because it is exactly the difference between a person who is left alone and a person who cannot be interfered with.

## Reading liberty against the framework

Four contributions, and a closing statement of the variable.

**The corpus needs the distinction between a won liberty and a licensed one.** A won liberty is extracted from a ruler by a faction that could have hurt him, and it is thereafter defended by that faction because their position rests on having won it. A licensed liberty is an inherited local arrangement that the ruler confirms, at no cost to himself, in exchange for quiet. They can look identical on the page — both are documents, both name protections, both are honoured for long periods. **They differ in what happens when the ruler changes his mind: a won liberty has a constituency that will fight for it, and a licensed one has beneficiaries who will petition for it.** The Achaemenid empire was almost entirely licensed, which is why it could combine more real plurality than most orders with less liberty in the framework's sense.

**The residue mechanism is confirmed, including in the hard case.** Protections in this empire came from factions with standing at moments of leverage — the Seven in 522, the Judaean priesthood under Artaxerxes — and the one instance in which a group below the nobility acquired something is exactly the byproduct the rule predicts. The Ionian demos received constitutions in 492 not because it had won anything but because the empire had concluded that its own client tyrants were a liability. **When you find a right in the hands of people with no leverage, you have found the residue of somebody else's quarrel.**

**The corpus should add the mechanism of loss, which is the reverse of the mechanism of gain and is nearly invisible.** *A liberty attached to a faction is*

*extinguished by the destruction of that faction, and the extinction leaves no testimony because it removes the witnesses.* Babylonia after 484 is the specimen: charters older than the empire, ending inside two years, documented only by the silence of the archives that had recorded everything else. Any account of an order's liberties assembled from surviving documents will therefore overstate them, systematically, in exactly the periods and places where they were being destroyed.

**And the one binding constraint in the tradition is a property of the instrument, not a protection of the person.** An order held together by documents must make documents irrevocable or it has no hold at all; and irrevocability is indifferent to content. The tradition remembers a Persian king who could not unsay what he had sealed, and remembers it in three separate stories in which the thing he could not unsay was a sentence of death. **Where the sovereign's word is the only thing that binds him, the binding will as often prevent mercy as prevent cruelty** — which is a general finding about legalism in personal rule, and one this collection should carry to its other cases.

**The variable, stated.** Liberty in the framework's sense is not the amount of interference a person suffers; it is whether anything he holds is held against the person who could interfere. By that measure the Achaemenid empire scores very low while scoring very high on tolerated difference, and the two facts are the same fact seen twice — the same identity this study has now found four times, between the cheapness of a chartered order and everything that follows from having chartered it.

## A note on sources.

Quoted exactly, from public-domain sources: Herodotus, *Histories* 3.31 on the royal judges and their answer to Cambyses, and 6.42 on Artaphernes' settlement with the Ionian cities, both in George Rawlinson's translation; Herodotus 1.137 on the law forbidding death for a single offence, in A. D. Godley's Loeb translation of 1921; and Daniel 6:8 and Esther 8:8 in the Authorised Version. Herodotus 6.43, on Mardonius deposing the Ionian tyrants and establishing democracies, is paraphrased rather than quoted; Herodotus flags it as something his Greek readers will find hard to credit, and modern treatments doubt that the measure was universal or that it extended beyond Ionia.

Paraphrased and not quoted: the Elephantine petitions and the memorandum authorising the rebuilding, as in the fourth module; the Demotic petition of Peteisi on Papyrus Rylands IX, whose modern editions and translations are in copyright and whose length and complexity are here summarised rather than represented; the flaying

of Sisamnes from Herodotus 5.25; Diodorus on Darius III and Charidemus; and the Persepolis material on the provisioning of travelling judges.

Provenance warnings, stated rather than buried. Daniel and Esther are Jewish compositions of the Hellenistic period, not Achaemenid documents; Daniel's Darius the Mede is not a historical king; and these texts are used here strictly as evidence for a widely held later tradition about Persian kingship, corroborated on the Greek side, and not as evidence of Achaemenid constitutional practice. Herodotus's account of the royal judges may be shaped by Greek interest in the contrast between law and personal rule, which is precisely the theme of the anecdote, and the answer he attributes to them is the sort of thing a storyteller invents; it is used here because the *institution* it describes is corroborated from the Persian administrative record even where the anecdote is not.

Paraphrased from modern scholarship, briefly and with credit: Caroline Waerzeggers on the end of the northern Babylonian archives in 484, with the hedge stated in the seventh module; the standard Assyriological treatment of *kidinnūtu* and the civic privileges of the old Mesopotamian cities, developed at greater length in this collection's Assyria study; and the scholarly literature on the Ionian settlement, which is divided on how far Mardonius's measure extended and on what "democracy" meant in this context.

Uncertainties and what is not claimed. No estimate is offered of how many petitions were answered, how many judges sat, or what proportion of disputes reached any court, because none of these is recoverable; the surviving petitions are those that were preserved by people who had reason to keep them, which is a biased sample in the direction of success. Nothing in this module claims that the Achaemenid empire was more or less oppressive than its neighbours or its successors, a comparison the evidence does not support in either direction; the claim is about the *kind* of protection available, not the quantity.

MODULE 10

# These Nine Kings

*Module 10 · change and collapse — two hundred and thirty years in which every challenge to the arrangement came from somebody who already had standing, and a conquest that did not have to defeat the arrangement at all*

## What the corpus predicts

*Elite Chaos*, this collection's statement on how orders change, makes a claim that is disenchanting and, on the evidence assembled there, largely correct: structural change never comes from a rising of the ruled against an intact floor. Unorganised bodies lose to organised violence, and a durable order is an armed settlement alterable only by those who command organised force. The floor cracks in four ways — the elite fractures and arms the people against itself; it exhausts itself in great-power war and must pay the survivors; it is conquered by a rival elite; or it overbreeds, seating fewer claimants than it produces, until its surplus turns revolutionary and leads the crowd as fuel. In every case the common man is present at the opening, as soldier or crowd or the weight a broken faction swings, and in none of them is he the author.

The paper holds that claim against its strongest objection and grants it: pressure from below is a genuine cause even where it is never the proximate agent, because a credible threat can force a cornered elite to widen the settlement rather than fight on.

The Achaemenid empire is an unusually clean test, because it lasted two hundred and thirty years, it was challenged repeatedly, and its founder published a catalogue of the men who challenged him.

## Nine kings

In the crisis of 522 and 521 the empire came closer to ending than at any point before Alexander. Darius had killed a man claiming to be Cyrus's son; the provinces rose; and by his own account he fought nineteen battles in a single year. At the end of the narrative on the cliff at Behistun he lists his opponents. In the translation of King and Thompson:

*Another was named Nidintu-Bêl, the Babylonian; he lied, saying: "I am Nebuchadnezzar, the son of Nabonidus." He made Babylon to revolt. Another was named Martiya, the Persian; he lied, saying: "I am Ummanniš, the king of Elam." He made*

*Elam to revolt. Another was Phraortes, the Mede; he lied, saying: "I am Khshathrita, of the dynasty of Cyaxares." He made Media to revolt. Another was Tritantaechmes, the Sagartian; he lied, saying: "I am king in Sagartia, of the dynasty of Cyaxares." He made Sagartia to revolt... Another was named Frâda, of Margiana; he lied, saying: "I am king of Margiana." He made Margiana to revolt... Vahyazdâta, a Persian; he lied, saying: "I am Smerdis, the son of Cyrus." He made Persia to revolt. Another was Arakha, an Armenian; he lied, saying: "I am Nebuchadnezzar, the son of Nabonidus." He made Babylon to revolt.*

And then: *These nine kings did I capture in these wars.*

Read the list for its grammar rather than its content. Every one of the nine is introduced with a claim to a throne, and in most cases a claim of descent — from Nabonidus, from Cyaxares, from Cyrus. Not one of them appears as a leader of a people rising against a burden. Each appears as a man asserting that he is the rightful holder of an existing office.

Darius's own vocabulary makes the point more sharply than any modern analysis could. He does not call them rebels; he calls them liars, and the lie is always about identity. He never denies that they were kings. He denies that they were the *right* kings. His conceptual apparatus has no category for a rising from below, and there is no sign that the absence caused him any difficulty, because there was nothing for the category to name.

## The rest of the record

Run the same test forward across the empire's life and the result does not vary.

The Babylonian revolts of 484 were led by Bel-shimanni and Shamash-eriba, and both took the title king of Babylon. The Egyptian revolts produced native dynasties — Amyrtaeus and the Twenty-eighth through Thirtieth Dynasties — that is, kings with priesthoods to crown them. The rising of 401 was led by Cyrus the Younger, a royal prince and satrap of Lydia. The disturbances of the 360s were led by satraps and by a dynast of Caria. The final act was performed by Bessus, satrap of Bactria and kinsman of the King, who murdered Darius III and declared himself Artaxerxes V.

In two hundred and thirty years, across an empire of perhaps seventeen to thirty-five million people, there is not one recorded rising of cultivators, labourers, deportees or slaves that changed anything.

The obvious objection has to be met and not waved away. Our sources are almost entirely elite productions — royal inscriptions, temple archives, Greek histories written by aristocrats — and a peasant rising might simply not have survived into them. That is

true and the seventh module of this study established the general principle: an order's record is kept by the people it pays.

But the objection does not rescue the flattering story, for a reason that is decisive. A rising that *succeeded* would leave effects even where it left no narrative. A change of dynasty, a rewritten settlement, a reduced assessment, a redistribution of land, an abolished obligation — any of these would appear in the Babylonian contracts, the Egyptian temple records, the tribute lists, the ration tablets. The archives that record everything else across this period record no such change. The settlement of the second module is recognisably the same settlement at the end as at the beginning, with the same exemptions attached to the same kinds of people. Whatever risings may have happened and gone unrecorded, none of them altered the arrangement.

And the fifth module explains why not. The ordinary subject of this empire could not leave, because his subsistence was fixed to irrigated land; was collected by his own priests and creditors rather than by anyone he could identify as foreign; had no organisation above the village; and confronted a floor that concentrated precisely at the points where nothing could be re-sourced. He was not a candidate for structural change. Nothing in his position made him one, and the framework predicts exactly that.

## Was the empire exhausted?

Test the second mechanism, because it is the one most often assumed.

The Achaemenid empire in 340 was not fiscally exhausted. The proof is in the store rooms: Alexander found more than forty thousand talents of bullion at Susa and something between a hundred and twenty and a hundred and ninety thousand at Persepolis, untouched, and used it to pay for the rest of his campaign. A state that dies with two centuries of accumulated surplus in its treasuries did not die of poverty.

Nor was it militarily spent. It had reconquered Egypt in 343 after sixty years of independence, which is the act of a state with real reach; it fielded very large armies at Issus and at Gaugamela; and its cavalry performed well at both.

But there was a failure in the military settlement, and it is one this study has been tracking since the second module, and it does not look like exhaustion. Bow land, horse land and chariot land had been created to produce archers, cavalrymen and chariot crews from the soil. By the Murashu material the obligation was routinely commuted to silver and discharged by hired substitutes, with a private firm financing the transaction. The fleet had been borrowed from Phoenicia and Ionia from the day it was acquired. And by the fourth century the best infantry available to the King, to his rebel satraps, and to Egypt alike was Greek and was hired.

So Persia arrived at 334 rich and solvent, with a settlement that no longer produced soldiers from land. That is not exhaustion. It is *commutation*, and it looks like health right up to the moment the market fails you — because silver buys an army only if somebody is selling, and only at the speed at which men can be recruited, which is not the speed at which a Macedonian phalanx crosses Anatolia.

## The counter-elite that was imported

Which brings this module to its one substantial disagreement with the model it is testing.

*Elite Chaos* derives the counter-elite from the order's own overproduction: an order that seats fewer claimants than it breeds generates a surplus of educated, ambitious, unplaced men who turn revolutionary and lead the crowd as the fuel of their own war. Robespierre the lawyer, Lenin the graduate.

Persia's counter-elite was not its own. It was bought from next door.

The Greek world in the fourth century was producing more organised, trained, armed men than its cities could employ, and it sold them. Cyrus the Younger marched on his brother in 401 with ten thousand Greek mercenaries. The rebel satraps of the 360s used Greek troops. Independent Egypt hired Greek generals — Chabrias, Agesilaus — to hold the Delta against the King. And the King hired Greeks himself, in numbers, including at Issus and Gaugamela, where Greek mercenaries fought for Darius against a Macedonian.

For a century, in other words, the Achaemenid empire and everybody rebelling against it drew their decisive infantry from the same external labour market, and the empire's own money was the principal thing sustaining it.

**An order that hires its military class from outside is buying its future counter-elite on an instalment plan.** The men it pays are trained at its expense, learn its roads and its distances and the composition of its armies, discover that its provincial forces cannot beat them, and go home and say so. Xenophon's *Anabasis* is the report: ten thousand Greeks marched to Babylonia, lost their employer and their generals, and walked out through the middle of the empire, and the book that records it was read by everybody in Greece who mattered for the next two generations.

Seen this way Alexander is not an alien intrusion into Persian history. He is the terminal case of a market Persia had been buying from for a hundred years — the last contractor, arriving to collect the whole account rather than a wage.

## 330

The conquest itself took four years and its shape confirms every finding in this study.

Granicus in 334, Issus in 333, Gaugamela on the first of October 331. Between the second and the third, Darius offered terms — all the territory west of the Euphrates, an enormous indemnity, and a daughter in marriage — and the tradition preserves Parmenion's response, that he would accept were he Alexander, and Alexander's reply that so would he, were he Parmenion. The anecdote may be a construction; what it records accurately is that the Persian King treated his empire as divisible by negotiation, which is what an empire of charters is.

After Gaugamela the arrangement performed exactly as designed. Mazaeus had commanded the Persian right at Gaugamela and fought Parmenion's wing to a standstill. He then surrendered Babylon, and Alexander appointed him satrap of Babylon — the same office, the same city, under a new King, with a Macedonian garrison commander and a Macedonian financial officer placed beside him. Abulites surrendered Susa with its treasury and was left in his satrapy. At Babylon Alexander sacrificed to Bel and ordered the restoration of the temples. In Egypt he had already been received and had sacrificed to the Egyptian gods.

That is the charter being reissued in a new name. Not one clause of the settlement had to be renegotiated: the priest kept his exemption, the prebendary kept his prebend, the satrap kept his province, and the cultivator paid the same share to the same collector. The novation was the conquest.

There is one contemporary non-Greek witness to Gaugamela, and it is worth flagging even though it is fragmentary. A Babylonian astronomical diary from that month records the battle, and its account of the Persian collapse differs from the Greek one: where the Greek sources have Darius fleeing and his army following, the Babylonian text is generally read as saying that the army abandoned the king. The tablet is damaged and the reading is not certain. But it is the only account of that day written by somebody who was not a Macedonian, and what it says is that the men left first.

Darius fled east and was seized by his own kinsman and satrap Bessus and murdered in the summer of 330. Bessus then declared himself Artaxerxes V — the last time in this study that a man claims a throne rather than takes one — and was destroyed within two years, betrayed by other Persians and handed over.

## Where it was actually hard

The counter-test is the most useful thing in the module, because it shows the same rule operating from the other side within the same war.

Where did Alexander have to fight? Tyre held out for seven months and had to be taken by mole and siege engine. Gaza held for two. The Uxian hill people fought. Ariobarzanes held the Persian Gates. And above all Bactria and Sogdiana took two years of the hardest campaigning of Alexander's life, against Spitamenes, and cost him more in men and time than the conquest of the entire Achaemenid heartland.

Those are precisely the places where the first module's rule does not apply. Tyre was a merchant city with a citizen government and no single man who could deliver it and remain what he was. The Uxians were a hill people with no purchasable seat. Bactria and Sogdiana were a frontier of Iranian nobility and steppe confederacies, where there was no chartered joint to novate and no treasury whose keeper could hand it over.

The core of the richest empire on earth changed hands in months. The margins, where nobody could be bought because there was nobody to buy, took years. That is the whole argument of this study, demonstrated twice in one war by the same commander.

## Reading collapse against the framework

Four contributions and a closing observation.

**The thesis of *Elite Chaos* is confirmed here about as firmly as a negative claim can be.** Across two hundred and thirty years, every recorded challenge to the Achaemenid arrangement was mounted by a man who already had standing — nine claimants catalogued by the founder himself, all asserting a throne; two men taking the title king of Babylon in 484; native dynasties in Egypt; a royal prince in 401; satraps in the 360s; a satrap and kinsman in 330. And the stronger form of the confirmation is not the absence of recorded peasant risings, which the sources might have suppressed, but the absence of any change in the settlement that a successful rising would have produced. The archives that record everything else record no such change.

**Conquest was the operative mechanism, and it worked at the speed of the charter rather than of the army.** State it for the corpus: *where an order is held by charter rather than by belief, a conqueror does not have to defeat the arrangement — only the man — after which the arrangement transfers by reissue.* Mazaeus, who fought at Gaugamela in the morning and governed Babylon for the winner by the autumn, is the specimen. This is the joint finding of the first, second and eighth modules arriving at its conclusion, and it explains a speed that force alone cannot.

**The counter-elite can be imported, and this should be added to the model.** *Elite Chaos* derives the counter-elite from the order's own surplus. Persia's surplus of armed, organised, ambitious men was produced by a neighbour and purchased on the open market for a century, by the King and by everyone rebelling against him alike. **An order that hires its military class from abroad is financing the training of its own successor**, because the contractor learns the ground, the distances, the composition of the defending forces and the price of every satrap, and there is no mechanism by which he can be made to forget. The Ten Thousand walked out of Babylonia in 401 and published the route.

**And commutation is a failure mode distinct from exhaustion, which the corpus should hold separately.** An exhausted empire is visibly poor and visibly beaten. Persia in 334 was neither: it had two centuries of bullion in its treasuries and had just reconquered Egypt. What had failed was the conversion of land into soldiers — bow land paying silver, the fleet borrowed, the infantry hired — and that failure is invisible in every ledger, because the ledgers show revenue rising. **A settlement that has commuted its service obligations into cash looks solvent until the moment it needs an army faster than one can be bought.**

**The closing observation, which is about the people this module has argued were not the authors.** They were present at every stage. They dug the canals that made the country worth taking and paid the share that filled the store rooms; they stood in the ranks at Gaugamela, on both sides; and afterwards they went on paying, to the same collector, under a new name. From a field outside Babylon in the spring of 330 the change of the world's largest empire would have been nearly undetectable: the same priest, the same tithe, the same calendar, the same date on which the water came. That is not a consolation and it is not offered as one. It is the most exact statement this study can make of who the arrangement was for, and of what it meant to be inside it without being party to it.

## A note on sources.

Quoted exactly, from a public-domain source: the Behistun inscription, paragraphs 52 and 53, listing the nine claimants and their assertions, in the translation of L. W. King and R. C. Thompson (London, 1907), with the qualification about that century-old rendering stated in the seventh module. The list is Darius's own and is therefore a hostile account of his opponents; that is precisely why the *form* of the claims is usable, since a king with an interest in discrediting his enemies had every reason to describe them as something worse than false kings if he could, and did not.

Paraphrased and not quoted: the exchange between Darius and Alexander over terms, and Parmenion's reported response, which appear in Arrian, Plutarch, Diodorus and Curtius in incompatible versions and whose historicity is doubted; the appointments of Mazaeus at Babylon and Abulites at Susa, from Arrian; the Babylonian astronomical diary for the month of Gaugamela, whose text is damaged and whose reading concerning the Persian army's conduct is contested; and the campaigns in Bactria and Sogdiana, from Arrian and Curtius.

Paraphrased from modern scholarship, briefly and with credit: the treatment of Greek mercenary service in Achaemenid armies and in the armies of those who rebelled against them, which is extensive and broadly agreed; Caroline Waerzeggers on the Babylonian revolts of 484, with the hedge stated in the seventh module; and the arguments over the Egyptian dynasties of the period of independence.

Uncertainties and what is not claimed. The treasury figures are given as ranges in the sixth module and are not repeated here as precise quantities. No claim is made that peasant risings never occurred in the Achaemenid empire — only that none is recorded and, more importantly, that no alteration to the settlement occurred of the kind a successful rising would have produced. The reading of the Babylonian diary as saying the army abandoned Darius is one among several proposed and is flagged as such in the text rather than relied upon. The number of Greek mercenaries in Persian service at any date is not recoverable; the figures in the Greek sources are estimates by interested parties. And nothing in this module claims that Alexander's victory was inevitable, which the near-run character of Granicus and Issus refutes; the claim is about what happened *after* the battles were won, and about why winning three of them was sufficient to acquire an empire that had absorbed nine simultaneous revolts two centuries earlier without losing a province.

MODULE 11

# Weeping and Mourning in the Land

*Module 11 · the grim accounting — the only body count this empire published, why it is not a count, what the sword actually did across two hundred and thirty years, and why the note on the land was called not by the conquest but by the division of the estate afterwards*

## What can and cannot be counted

An armed group took power, held it for two hundred and thirty years, and lost it. This module asks what that cost, in the two currencies the framework tracks: the sword, and the metabolic note — the debt an advanced agriculture incurs when coordinated works lift a population above what the unimproved land would carry, which falls due whenever the coordination stops.

The sword column cannot be totalled and this study will not pretend otherwise. There is no census. There are no casualty records, no muster rolls that survive, no burial archaeology of the relevant kind. Every number in the Greek sources for Persian armies and Persian losses is an estimate by an interested party, usually an enemy, frequently in the hundreds of thousands, and none of them is usable.

There is exactly one set of figures produced by the empire itself. It is worth beginning there, because what it turns out to be is more instructive than any total would have been.

## The only numbers, and why they are not counts

The Behistun inscription exists in Old Persian, Elamite and Babylonian on the cliff, and in Aramaic on papyrus. The Babylonian and Aramaic versions carry something the Old Persian and Elamite do not: for each of the nineteen battles, a precise enumeration of the enemy slain and taken alive.

That looks, at first sight, like the one hard datum in the entire accounting — an empire's own tally of the dead in the war that founded it.

It is not. The figures have been examined closely, and the scholarly judgement is that they do not represent counts of battlefield dead or prisoners. The decisive evidence is internal and it is the sort of thing this project exists to notice. The enemy losses recorded are highest where the King commands in person; lower where a Persian general commands a detached force; and lowest of all where the commander is one of Darius's non-Persian lieutenants.

The numbers vary with the rank of the man giving the orders, not with the size or difficulty of the battle. They are not a casualty schedule. They are a table of relative credit — a demonstration, in figures, that the King kills more than his generals and his Persian generals kill more than his foreign ones. The Babylonian version had more space than the Old Persian, and the space was filled with arithmetic in praise of seniority.

So the general rule the corpus can take from this is worth stating plainly: **where a régime publishes casualty figures, test whether the numbers vary with the enemy or with the rank of the commander.** If they vary with rank, they are a ranking. Behistun's do, and they are.

This study therefore gives no total for the dead of the Achaemenid empire, and holds that any study which gives one has manufactured it.

## What the sword did

What can be done is to describe, with sources, what the violence consisted of.

**At the foundation.** Media changed hands without a battle. Babylonia cost one field engagement at Opis, followed by a killing that the Babylonian chronicle records in a clause whose reading is disputed but whose subject is not — men died there in numbers sufficient for a chronicler under the new regime to note it. Lydia cost a battle and the storming of a capital, then a revolt and its suppression, and then the reduction of the Greek and Carian and Lycian cities one at a time by siege mound. Of that last campaign Herodotus says that Harpagus laid waste the lower part of Asia, and then says that he will not go through every nation subdued but only those that gave trouble or did something worth recording. That sentence should be read as what it is: an admission that the record of this campaign is a selection, and that the unrecorded portion is not the peaceful portion. Phocaea and Teos put their populations on ships. The people of Xanthus are described as destroying their own families and dying in the fighting.

Cambyses' expedition south from Egypt failed in the desert with, on Herodotus's account, the army eating its own; and a force sent against the Ammonians never returned.

**At the founding crisis.** Nineteen battles in a year, and the founder's own description of what he did with the losers. Of the Median claimant, in King and Thompson's translation: *I cut off his nose, and his ears, and his tongue, and I put out one eye, and he was kept in fetters at my palace entrance, and all the people beheld him.* That is not an accusation by an enemy. It is the King's own account, published across the empire, of a man mutilated and displayed at his door as an exhibit.

**In maintenance.** The clearest documented atrocity of the whole period is the settlement of the Ionian revolt, and it deserves to be given entire, in Godley's translation:

*The Persian fleet wintered at Miletus, and putting out to sea in the next year easily subdued the islands that lie off the mainland, Chios and Lesbos and Tenedos. Whenever they took an island, the foreigners would "net" each severally. This is the manner of their doing it:—the men link hands and make a line reaching from the northern sea to the southern, and then advance over the whole island hunting the people down. They took likewise also the Ionian cities of the mainland, albeit not by netting the people; for that was not possible. There the Persian generals failed not to fulfil the threats which they had uttered against the Ionians when they were encamped over against them; for when they had gained the mastery over the cities, they chose out the comeliest boys and castrated them, making them eunuchs instead of men, and they carried the fairest maidens away to the king; this they did, and burnt the cities, yea, and their temples.*

Miletus itself was sacked and a body of its people deported to the head of the Persian Gulf. Babylonia after 484 lost, on the reading discussed in earlier modules, the class of families whose archives had recorded everything for two centuries. Egypt was reconquered repeatedly, most severely by Artaxerxes III in 343, whose settlement the Egyptian priestly tradition remembered as sacrilege.

**At the ending.** Alexander's campaign cost Tyre a seven-month siege ending in mass killing and enslavement, Gaza two months and the same, and Persepolis a sack. Bactria and Sogdiana cost two years of the most destructive fighting of his life, conducted against a population rather than an army.

Set beside the routine, one line of the sword accounting stands out and it was named in the fifth module: five hundred boys a year from Babylonia, as a standing item in a fiscal schedule, to be made eunuchs. Put that item next to the passage above and something becomes visible that neither shows alone. **The routine extraction and the atrocity are the same instrument at two settings.** The empire did not invent a punishment for the Ionians. It applied its normal revenue procedure at punitive intensity, to people who had rebelled, and the only difference was the rate.

## The forgetting

The user's first proposition — that after enough time people forget that violence made the arrangement — is confirmed here about as thoroughly as anywhere in the corpus, and the mechanism has a particular twist.

By 330 the Persian order was two hundred and twenty years old, and it was not experienced as an imposition by anybody whose testimony survives. Judaean scripture

calls the founder the anointed of the Lord. Egyptian priests entered Persian kings into their own sequences of pharaohs. Babylonian scribes dated their contracts by Persian regnal years, for two centuries, without comment. When a Macedonian arrived, no province rose to greet him as a liberator from a foreign yoke, because the yoke had stopped being foreign.

The twist is that the forgetting was accelerated by the cheapness. **An order that takes power without destroying anything leaves nothing behind to remind anyone that it took power.** There is no Persian equivalent of the burnt layer at Nineveh or the mass graves of a colonial pacification, because the conquest of 539 consisted very largely in a change of name on existing instruments. And the empire published no annals of its wars, for the reasons the seventh module set out. So the two things that normally preserve the memory of a founding violence — the ruins and the boasting — were both largely absent.

The consequence for the record is a warning rather than a finding. Assyria is remembered as exceptionally violent partly because it published its violence at length; Persia is remembered as mild partly because it rarely needed violence and never advertised what it used. Neither reputation is a measurement of conduct. Both are measurements of documentation.

## The metabolic note

Now the second currency, and the answer is unexpected and it organises the module.

The setup is established. The core provinces of this empire — Babylonia and the Iranian plateau — carried populations far above what the unimproved land would support, and did so because water was led to fields by works that required coordinated maintenance every single year: canals cleaned, qanats dug out, levees repaired, allocation adjudicated. That obligation falls on whoever is holding the country. Interrupt the coordination and the note falls due, and it is paid in famine and in the diseases that follow famine.

So the question is whether the Achaemenid conquests, or the Achaemenid collapse, interrupted it.

**In 539, they did not.** The evidence is the preceding study in this collection: Michael Jursa's work on the Babylonian economy of the long sixth century describes canals extended and date gardens laid out on former arable, an investment that begins under the Neo-Babylonian kings and continues straight across the Persian conquest without a break. The men who organised the digging kept their positions, so the digging happened.

**In 330, they did not either, and for exactly the same reason.** Mazaeus surrendered Babylon and was reappointed satrap of Babylon. Abulites surrendered Susa and remained in his satrapy. The administrative apparatus that assigned the labour and adjudicated the water was confirmed in post within months of Gaugamela, by a conqueror who had every reason to keep the richest agricultural province in the world producing. There is no famine in the Babylonian record for 331 or 330.

That is a striking negative result and it is the direct consequence of everything this study has found. A chartered order transfers by novation, and a novation does not interrupt anything. The population held above carrying capacity by coordinated works never noticed that the world's largest empire had changed hands, because the men who ran the works did not change.

**And then, after 323, the note was called.**

When Alexander died the estate was divided, and Babylonia — the metabolic heart of the whole arrangement — was fought over. In the Babylonian War of 311 to 309, Antigonus and Seleucus contested the province directly. The Babylonian chronicle of those years survives, damaged, and it records the fighting around Babylon: attacks on the city, the plundering of city and countryside, the firing of a storehouse, the razing of Cutha. And twice, in the surviving lines, it uses a phrase which the modern editions render as *weeping and mourning in the land*.

The military detail is the mechanism. Seleucus, outnumbered, dispersed his army and fought a guerrilla campaign; Antigonus responded by plundering and razing the countryside to force a pitched battle. That is precisely the condition under which an irrigation economy is destroyed — not by killing the cultivators but by making a season's coordinated work impossible across a whole watershed, twice, three times, in successive years, while both armies live off the same land.

So the accounting comes out in a way that inverts the intuitive picture. **The conquest of this empire cost its population less than the division of its estate.** Persia was conquered twice, in 539 and in 330, and neither conquest produced a recorded famine anywhere in its core. Its estate was divided once, and the contemporary chronicle of that division says twice that there was weeping and mourning in the land.

The caveat has to be stated and not buried. The long decline of southern Mesopotamian urbanism is a real phenomenon with multiple causes and a contested chronology: progressive salinisation, argued at length by Jacobsen and Adams and substantially revised since; shifts in the river courses; and, in the Hellenistic period, the foundation of Seleucia on the Tigris, which drew population and administration away from Babylon by design rather than by disaster. The Diadochi wars cannot be assigned

the whole of that decline. What can be said is narrower and firm: the one moment in this story when a contemporary Babylonian document records generalised suffering in the land is not 539 and not 330 but the years when the succession to Alexander was being settled by armies in the fields.

## Reading the accounting against the framework

Four contributions.

**A published body count should be tested for what it varies with.** Behistun's casualty figures are the only numbers the Achaemenid state ever issued, they appear only in the versions with spare room, and they scale with the rank of the commanding officer rather than with the engagement. *Where a régime publishes its own casualty figures, ask whether the numbers track the enemy or the hierarchy.* If they track the hierarchy, they are an honours list wearing an accountant's clothes, and the corpus should treat every such tally that way until shown otherwise.

**The routine and the atrocity are one instrument at two settings.** Five hundred boys a year, as a line in a tribute schedule, to be made eunuchs; and the comeliest boys of the Ionian cities castrated as a reprisal, with the fairest girls sent to the King and the temples burnt. **An order that has normalised a practice as revenue does not need to invent anything in order to escalate it as terror.** This is a general finding and it should be carried to the other cases: look at what an order takes routinely, and you have the inventory of what it will do punitively.

**Cheapness of conquest and speed of forgetting are the same property.** An order that acquires a province by re-signing its existing instruments destroys nothing, leaves no ruin, and consequently leaves no monument to its own violence. Add to that a royal genre with no place for campaign narrative, and the founding force becomes invisible within a generation or two. **The reputation of an order for mildness is partly a measurement of how little it had to break, and partly an artefact of what it declined to write down** — and the two are easily mistaken for a third thing, which is virtue.

**And the metabolic note is called by fragmentation, not by conquest.** This is the module's substantive addition. *Where a population is held above carrying capacity by coordinated works, a conquest that novates the coordinating apparatus is metabolically almost free, and a succession dispute that divides it is catastrophic* — because the works need a single authority over an entire watershed, and two armies contesting a countryside is the exact condition in which a year's maintenance does not get done. A chartered order is therefore safest at the moment it is conquered by one man and most dangerous at the moment it is inherited by several. Persia's population survived Cyrus

and survived Alexander. It did not survive the Diadochi as well, and the chronicle of those years is the only document in this entire study written by a Babylonian about generalised suffering in Babylonia.

## A note on sources.

Quoted exactly, from public-domain sources: Herodotus, *Histories* 6.31–32 on the netting of the islands and the treatment of the Ionian cities, in A. D. Godley's Loeb translation of 1921; and the Behistun inscription, paragraph 32, on the mutilation and display of Phraortes, in the translation of L. W. King and R. C. Thompson (London, 1907), with the qualification about that rendering stated in the seventh module.

Paraphrased and not quoted: the Babylonian Diadochi chronicle (BCHP 3, formerly ABC 10), whose text is badly damaged and whose current reading is the work of modern editors; the phrase given in the text as *weeping and mourning in the land* is the modern editors' rendering of a formula that occurs twice in the surviving lines, and is reproduced here as a short phrase with that attribution rather than as a quotation from a public-domain edition. The Nabonidus Chronicle on Opis is paraphrased for the copyright reason stated in the first module, with its disputed reading noted there. Diodorus, Arrian and Curtius on the sieges of Tyre and Gaza and the Bactrian campaign are paraphrased; their casualty and enslavement figures are not reproduced here, because they are the estimates of authors writing centuries later at several removes and this module has just argued at length against using such numbers.

Paraphrased from modern scholarship, briefly and with credit: the analysis of the Behistun casualty figures as a rhetorical rather than statistical structure, and specifically the observation that the recorded enemy losses correlate with the rank of the Persian commander, which is the argument of the recent literature on those figures and is the load-bearing point of this module's opening section; Michael Jursa on Babylonian agrarian investment across the conquest of 539; Caroline Waerzeggers on the archives after 484, with the hedge stated earlier; and the long and contested literature on Mesopotamian salinisation associated with Thorkild Jacobsen and Robert McCormick Adams, which has been substantially revised and is cited here only to state that the causes of southern Mesopotamian decline are multiple and not resolvable to any single event.

What is not claimed. No total is given for deaths caused by the Achaemenid empire in its foundation, its maintenance or its fall, because none is recoverable and the only figures the empire itself produced have been shown to be something other than counts. No population figure is offered for any province before or after any of the events described. The absence of recorded famine in Babylonia in 539 and 330 is an argument

from silence in archives that are otherwise dense for those years, which makes it a reasonably strong silence but a silence nonetheless. And the assignment of the Diadochi wars as the moment the metabolic note fell due rests on one damaged chronicle and on the military narrative of the Babylonian War; it is offered as the best available reading and not as a demonstration.

MODULE 12

# The Throne-Bearers

*Module 12 · convergence and divergence — where this order meets the framework's other cases and where it stands alone; the one thing two centuries of chartering did form, which is also the thing that made the empire disposable; and the strongest case its defenders would make, stated in full and answered without flinching*

## The position, and who else has stood in it

The method this collection runs on holds that patterns recur not because history has a direction but because a position poses a problem with only so many good answers, and men standing in like positions find their way to the same small set independently.

State the Achaemenid position in its bare form. A small conquering nation, numbering perhaps a few hundred thousand, has acquired a territory of some five and a half million square kilometres containing between seventeen and thirty-five million people. Those people are not a blank field. They are organised into several complete, ancient, self-running orders, each with its own clergy, its own law, its own calendar, its own scribal class and its own account of why obedience is owed. The conqueror cannot administer them directly because he has no administrative class of his own, no literacy to speak of, and a communications network in which a message takes a fortnight and an army takes a season. He must nevertheless extract from all of it, permanently.

That position has, at most, three answers. Destroy the existing orders and rebuild — which is what Assyria attempted, at enormous and finally unsustainable cost. Absorb them, form their populations into your own order, and admit them — which is expensive, takes generations, and requires that you be willing to share what you have. Or leave them entirely intact, pay their custodians, take a share, and never let anybody in.

Persia took the third, and it is worth cataloguing who else has, because the list is long and almost none of them had ever heard of Persia.

## The cases that converged

The Aztec Triple Alliance is the cleanest independent instance in the corpus, because there is no possible channel of transmission. Confronted with a valley and a hinterland full of city-states that already had dynasties, temples and tribute systems, the

Alliance left the local rulers in place, took tribute in goods, and administered almost nothing. This collection's study of that order records the diagnostic negative in a single sentence: no school was opened in a tributary province to teach a subject population. That is the Achaemenid answer, reached on the other side of the world, by people who had never seen a horse.

The Ottoman millet arrangement is the same instrument at a different scale and with sharper edges: the confessional communities keep their law, their courts and their clergy, their leaders are confirmed by the Porte and answer to it for taxes and quiet, and nobody is required to become a Turk. The early Islamic caliphates ran a variant with an explicit price schedule — the conquered keep their religion and their law and pay a tax for the privilege, and conversion is made economically attractive rather than compulsory, which produces the same near-term result and a very different one over five centuries.

And then, twenty-four hundred years after Cyrus, the British in Northern Nigeria. Lugard's forces overran a functioning Sokoto Caliphate — an order this collection's study of that colony describes as having reached the cheap pole, running on the genuine conviction of the governed. What Britain did with it is the Achaemenid answer restated in Edwardian minutes: keep the emirs, keep the Islamic courts, keep the aristocracy, collect the tax through them, and — the finding that matters most here — open twelve government schools against twenty-five thousand Qur'anic ones.

Across all of these the diagnostic established in the third module of this study holds: **does the crown pay the local clergy?** Persia paid for the sacrifices at Jerusalem, restored the Egyptian temple subsidies, and issued rations for Elamite gods from the same storehouses as for Ahuramazda. The Ottomans salaried their patriarchs. Britain paid its emirs. In every case the answer is yes, and in every case the reason is the same: a functioning belief already maintained at the population's own expense is the cheapest asset a conqueror can acquire, and the only way to acquire it is to keep paying its caretakers.

## The case that diverged, on the same axis

The instructive divergence is not Rome. It is the Inca, because the Inca stood in almost exactly the Aztec position at almost exactly the same time and gave the opposite answer.

Tawantinsuyu built the instruments the Aztecs did not: a state cult, a state language, the systematic resettlement of populations, and — decisively for this study's purposes — a school in the capital for the heirs of subject lords. That is not a tributary

hegemony. That is a formation programme, and it was pursued deliberately by an order that had every option the Aztecs had.

The divergence is not cultural and it is not a difference of temperament. It is positional, and this collection's own studies supply the variable: the Aztecs were building on top of a valley already full of dynasties with seats to be left in place, and the Inca were building across a landscape where no completed imperial order stood ready to be inherited. **The choice between chartering and forming tracks what the conqueror found standing, not what he believed.** Where there is a going concern with a seizable seat, chartering is available and it is always cheaper; where there is not, the conqueror must build a formation or hold the ground by force for ever.

That places Persia exactly. It is the largest instance in the record of the first case — a conqueror who found four complete orders standing and took all four by re-signing their instruments.

## The door Persia never opened

Rome is the divergence that matters for the ending, because Rome began close to where Persia began and finished somewhere Persia never went.

The early Roman provincial system is recognisably the chartered model: client kings, local law, tribute farmed through intermediaries, temples left standing. And then Rome did the thing that no order in this study's convergence list did. It admitted people. The Italians got the citizenship by war; the provincials got it by service, by manumission, by grant, and finally, in 212, by a single edict covering nearly everybody. A Gaul sat in the Senate. Provincials became emperors. The category of Roman ceased to be a description of ancestry and became a status a man could acquire.

Persia had no such door and appears never to have contemplated one. There was no citizenship, no naturalisation, no ladder, no examination, no path. Udjahorresnet rose about as high as a subject could rise — royal physician, holder of Persian confidence, the man who arranged Cambyses' Egyptian titulary — and in every document he is an Egyptian. The Judaean priesthood held a royal commission with powers of death and banishment and remained Judaean. Two hundred and thirty years produced, so far as the record shows, not one instance of a subject becoming a Persian.

And the honest accounting of Rome's door has to be given in the same breath, because this collection does not hand out prizes. The road to Roman citizenship ran through the destruction of Carthage, the Gallic wars, and the enslavement of the Mediterranean on a scale Persia never approached. Admission is expensive and somebody always pays for it. What can be said is narrower: Rome's order could grow a

constituency and Persia's could not, and that difference explains both why Rome absorbed catastrophe repeatedly and why Persia changed hands in four years.

## What chartering did to the chartered

There is a cost of this model that falls not on the conqueror and not on the subject elite but on the people underneath the subject elite, and the Nigeria study in this collection names it in a sentence: indirect rule did not preserve the emirate; it made it absolute. The mechanism is that chartering replaces several internal checks on a local ruler with one external check, and the external check cares about receipts and quiet and nothing else.

Test it on Persia and it holds. Before the exile, a Judaean high priest operated within a structure containing a king, a court, rival priestly houses, prophets with a licence to denounce, and a body of elders. Under the Persian charter examined in the second and fourth modules, a priest-scribe holds a commission from the King of Persia to appoint magistrates and judges over the whole province, to teach the law to those who do not know it, and to punish refusal with death, banishment, confiscation of goods or imprisonment. That is a concentration of authority over Judaeans, in Judaean hands, that no Judaean institution had held under Judaean kings — and it exists because a foreign crown wrote it down.

And it was used. Nehemiah, holding the King's commission, contends with men over their children's language, curses them, beats them, and tears out their hair.

**Chartering strengthens the local elite against its own people, and the strengthening is invisible in the imperial record because it is not imperial coercion.** The man being beaten in Jerusalem was not beaten by a Persian. He was beaten by his own governor, using a power his own governor had been given by a king nine hundred miles away who would never hear of it. Any measurement of an empire's oppressiveness that counts only what its own officers did will miss this entirely, and it is probably the largest single component of what chartered rule actually felt like.

## The one thing Persia formed

Which brings this study to the finding it has been assembling since the first module, and to a correction of its own fourth.

The fourth module concluded that the Achaemenid empire formed nobody outside its own nation, that it had no apparatus with which to do so, and that its real constituency was therefore exactly as wide as its payroll. That is right about loyalty and

it is not the whole account, and the correction comes from this collection's study of the man who took the empire.

That study found that Alexander did not have to build belief among the conquered, because a belief was already there and he could inherit it whole by occupying the seat: a two-century-old Persian conviction that obedience runs to the King of Kings, deep enough that the conquered mass was the *least* brittle part of the order and the brittleness sat in the conqueror's own army instead. Its formulation is *inherit the robe by taking the seat*.

Set that beside this study's finding and the two resolve exactly, and the resolution is the closing structural statement of the whole case.

**Persia formed nobody into loyalty to the Achaemenids, and two centuries of chartering formed nearly everybody into the assumption of a seat.**

Consider the mechanism, because it is entirely inadvertent. Every instrument in the empire ran in the King's name. The Judaean priest's immunity from toll, tribute and custom; the Egyptian temple's restored subsidy; the Elephantine garrison's permit to burn incense on a rebuilt altar; the Babylonian prebendary's confirmation; the satrap's commission; the bow-land holder's tenure — every one of these named an office and was renewed from it, generation after generation, for two hundred and thirty years. Nobody was ever taught to love a family. Everybody was taught, by the ordinary operation of the paperwork that governed their lives, that there is a throne above the local order and that this is where such things come from.

That is the mechanism *The Architect and the Inheritor* describes, working on a political object rather than a religious one. The origin was a conquest; the thing became, over generations, the furniture of reality; and that it was built does not make the belief a lie — it makes it a thing that was built and then became real. By 330 the existence of a King of Kings was not a Persian policy. It was a feature of the world, like the calendar and the river.

And it is precisely what made the empire disposable. **A conviction attached to an office transfers with the office.** Persia manufactured, slowly and without meaning to, the exact belief that permitted a Macedonian to acquire everything it had in four years — because what the subject elites believed in was a seat, and Alexander sat in it, confirmed their instruments, sacrificed to their gods, and reappointed the man who had fought him at Gaugamela to govern Babylon.

The empire's own monuments say so, if one looks at them structurally. On the rock-cut tombs of the kings at Naqsh-e Rustam the subject peoples are carved beneath the royal platform, each in his national dress, each labelled by name, physically holding the throne up. It is meant as a statement of dominion and it is also, read as engineering, a

perfectly accurate diagram of the arrangement this study has described. The peoples bear the platform. The platform is the thing. And the man seated on it is whoever is seated on it.

There is a coda, and it is almost too neat to be true, but it is in the sources. When Alexander died at Babylon and his generals could not agree who should command, Eumenes had a tent set up containing an empty throne, with the dead king's diadem and sceptre and armour laid on it, and the commanders met and took their decisions in front of it. Men who had conquered the world could not deliberate without a seat in the room. That is what two and a half centuries of Achaemenid paperwork had installed in the political imagination of everybody who dealt with it, including the men who destroyed the dynasty that installed it.

## The strongest counter-position

The case for this empire is serious, it is made by serious people, and it deserves to be put at full strength rather than in the weakened form that is easy to answer.

It runs as follows.

The Achaemenid empire ended a cycle. The pattern of Near Eastern imperial rule before it — established by Assyria and continued by Babylon — was mass deportation, the destruction of cities, the carrying off of gods, and the systematic breaking of conquered peoples as an instrument of policy. Cyrus reversed it. Gods went back to their cities, deportees went home, temples were rebuilt at royal expense. Whatever the motive, the Judaeans returned and the temple was raised again, and the Babylonians kept their liturgy uninterrupted through a change of dynasty that would previously have meant a sack.

The empire then governed something approaching a quarter of the human species, speaking dozens of languages and worshipping dozens of gods, for two hundred and thirty years, with no programme of religious persecution, no campaign of cultural erasure, no forced conversion, and no attempt to impose a language on anybody. It codified Egyptian law at royal order and expense rather than replacing it. It paid for foreign sacrifices out of its own revenue. It provided the longest peace the ancient Near East ever had, roads that were safe, standard weights, and a market of unprecedented size. Compared with what preceded it, with what followed it in the Hellenistic wars, and with a great deal that has happened since, this is not a small achievement. It is arguably the most successful management of religious and cultural difference attempted anywhere before the modern period.

And then the philosophical form of the argument, which is the strongest part and the part this study must meet head on. Eleven modules have laboured to show that all

of this was cheap rather than kind — that the tolerance was a fiscal instrument, the subsidy a purchase, the charter a leash. The counter-position says that this is a category error. Motives are private, unrecoverable and, for the purposes of judging an order, largely irrelevant. What people live inside is outcomes. A Judaean farmer in 450, or an Egyptian priest, or a Babylonian brewer, did not experience a motive; he experienced a temple that stood, a festival that happened on time, a law administered in his own language, and no soldier at his door. To grade an order by the imputed interior states of men we cannot examine, rather than by what it did to the people in it, is to substitute a morality play for an assessment.

## Answered

Concede the whole of the first part, because it is true and this study has affirmed each element of it in its place. The reversal of the Assyro-Babylonian pattern was real. The absence of religious persecution across two centuries was real. The peace was real, the roads were real, the codification of Egyptian law was real, and the subsidised sacrifices were real. Nothing in the preceding eleven modules denies any of it, and a reader who takes from this study the impression that the Achaemenid empire was a wicked order has misread it.

Concede also that the philosophical point is partly right, and the concession is not a formality. This framework is not a moral scoring system and does not have a mechanism for converting structure into virtue or its absence. It has never claimed that the Achaemenid record was worse than it looks. If the question is whether it was better to live under Persia in 450 than under Assyria in 700 or under the Diadochi in 310, the answer is almost certainly yes, and the answer does not depend on anybody's motives.

Three things must nevertheless be refused.

**Motive matters for prediction, not for praise.** The reason to establish that the tolerance was structural rather than dispositional is not to withhold credit; it is that the two make different predictions, and the record tells us which was operating. A disposition is stable. A policy varies with circumstance. And this one varied: Cambyses cut the Egyptian temple revenues and Darius restored them; Xerxes broke the Babylonian urban notability and their archives stop inside two years; the Persian generals in Ionia castrated the boys of the captured cities, carried the girls to the King, and burnt the cities and their temples. The same order did all of that and also paid for the sacrifices at Jerusalem. No disposition behaves that way. A policy does, and a subject who understood that he held a licence rather than a right understood his position correctly — while those who took it for a right, like the Babylonian families of 484, were mistaken in a way that cost them everything they had.

**The five hundred boys.** Babylonia's annual assessment included, on the record we have, five hundred boys to be made eunuchs, alongside the silver. Colchis rendered a hundred boys and a hundred maidens every five years. These are not atrocities committed in the heat of a war; they are line items in a routine fiscal schedule, falling on ordinary households, year after year, in the most peaceful province of the most tolerant empire in the ancient world. Any account of Achaemenid Persia that has no place for that item, or for the men linking hands from one coast of an island to the other and driving the population before them, is an account of the robe rather than the order. Both belong in one ledger, and the ledger is not required to produce a verdict.

**And the tolerance and the exclusion are a single act.** This is the deepest of the three and it is where the framework earns its keep. Persia left everybody alone because it never intended to admit anybody. The Egyptian priest kept his law and could never become a Persian. The Judaean kept his temple and remained a Judaean in every document that mentions him. There was no forced conversion because there was no conversion; no imposed language because there was no membership to be conferred by learning it; no cultural erasure because there was no culture on offer to be erased into. The mildness and the closure are not two policies that happened to coexist. They are the same fact seen from either end, and you cannot take the one without the other.

That is the sum, and it is the honest one, and it does not resolve into a verdict.

Because after all three refusals the counter-position keeps something, and this study will not pretend otherwise. *Left alone and not admitted* is, for most people in most centuries, a better condition than *formed and admitted*, and the road to admission has run — in Rome, in every colonial case in this collection, in the modern nation-state — through somebody's destruction. Persia's bargain was that nobody would be made into anything, and the price of that bargain was that nobody could rise, and the empire that struck it was carried away in four years by a man who understood that all he had to do was sit down.

The peoples on the tombs at Naqsh-e Rustam are still holding the platform up. They are named, and they are in their own clothes, and not one of them is looking at the man on the throne.

## A note on sources.

This module argues from findings established with sources in the eleven preceding modules and in other studies in this collection, and introduces little new primary evidence; the quotations and documents it relies on — the Behistun inscription in King and Thompson's public-domain translation of 1907, Herodotus in Rawlinson's and Godley's public-domain translations, the Cyrus Cylinder in Rogers's translation of

1912, and the Authorised Version for Ezra and Nehemiah — are cited in the modules where they are first used, and the reservations recorded there apply here unchanged.

Paraphrased and not quoted: the throne-bearer reliefs and accompanying inscriptions at the royal tombs at Naqsh-e Rustam, described rather than reproduced, since the standard English translation of the Old Persian is Roland Kent's and is in copyright; and the account of Eumenes' tent and the empty throne, which appears in Diodorus, Plutarch, Nepos and Polyaenus in differing forms, and whose details vary between them.

Drawn from other studies in this collection, with their findings credited to them: the Aztec Triple Alliance study for the tributary hegemony and the absence of any school in a tributary province; the Tawantinsuyu study for the Inca formation programme, the state cult and the resettlement of populations; the British Northern Nigeria study for the twelve government schools against twenty-five thousand Qur'anic ones and for the finding that indirect rule made the emirate absolute; and the Alexander and the Successors study for the proposition that the belief Alexander needed from the Persians was inherited by occupying the seat rather than cut for the occasion, which this module adopts and joins to its own.

Uncertainties and what is not claimed. The convergence argument is a claim about like positions producing like solutions and is not a claim of influence; no channel of transmission is asserted between Persia and Mesoamerica, and the Ottoman and British cases are treated as independent arrivals at the same answer rather than as imitations, notwithstanding that educated Britons had read Herodotus. The population and area figures are the ranges given in the landscape. The claim that no subject ever became a Persian is a claim about the surviving record and not a demonstration; what can be said is that the record contains no such case and no institution by which it could have happened. And the comparison with Rome concerns the presence or absence of a mechanism of admission, not a judgement about which order was better to live in, which this study declines to make.